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The Book-Bills of Narcissus

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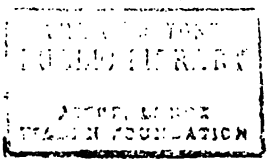
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The Book-Bills of Narcissus : :

An Account Rendered : : : : by : : : : Richard Le Gallienne

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NOTE.—*This third edition has been revised, and Chapter V. is entirely new.*

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TO MILDRED

ALWAYS thy book, too late acknowledged thine,
Now when thine eyes no earthly page may read;
Blinded with death, or blinded with the shine
Of love's own lore celestial. Small need,
Forsooth, for thee to read my earthly line,
That on immortal flowers of fancy feed;
What should my angel do to stoop to mine,
Flowers of decay of no immortal seed.

Yet, love, if in thy lofty dwelling-place,
Higher than notes of any soaring bird,
Beyond the beam of any solar light,
A song of earth may scale the awful height,
And at thy heavenly window find thy face—
I know my voice shall never fall unheard.

December 6th, 1894.

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THE BOOK-BILLS OF NARCISSUS

O mes lettres d'amour, de vertu, de jeunesse ;
C'est donc vous ! Je m'enivre encore à votre ivresse ;
Je vous lis à genoux.
Souffrez que pour un jour je reprenne votre âge !
Laissez-moi me cacher, moi, l'heureux et le sage,
Pour pleurer avec vous !

J'avais donc dix-huit ans ! j'étais donc plein de songes !
L'espérance en chantant me berçait de mensonges
Un astre m'avait lui !
J'étais un dieu pour toi qu'en mon cœur seul je nomme !
J'étais donc cet enfant, hélas ! devant qui l'homme
Rougit presque aujourd'hui !

VICTOR HUGO—Les Feuilles d' Automne.

THE BOOK-BILLS OF NARCISSUS

CHAPTER I.

Introductory—A Word of Wisdom found written, like the most Ancient, on Leather.

"AH! old men's boots don't go there, sir!" said the bootmaker to me one day, as he pointed to the toes of a pair I had just brought him for mending. It was a significant observation, I thought; and as I went on my way home, writing another such chronicle with every springing step, it filled me with much reflection—largely of the nature of platitude, I have little doubt: such reflection, Reader, as is even already, I doubt less, rippling the surface of your mind with ever-widening circles. Yes! you sigh with an air, it is in the unconscious autobiographies we are every

moment writing—not those we publish in two volumes and a supplement—where the truth about us is hid. Truly it is a thought that has thrilled dead bosoms, I agree, but why be afraid of it for that, Reader? Truth is not become a platitude only in our day. "The Preacher" knew it for such some considerable time ago, and yet he did not fear to "write and set in order many proverbs."

You have kept a diary for how many years? Thirty? dear me! But have you kept your wine-bills? If you ever engage me to write that life, which, of course, must some day be written—I would n't write it myself—don't trouble about your diary. Lend me your private ledger. "There the action lies in his true nature."

Yet I should hardly, perhaps, have evoked this particular corollary from that man of leather's observation, if I had not chanced one evening to come across those old book-bills of my friend Narcissus, about which I have undertaken to write here, and been struck—well-nigh awe-struck—by the won-

derful manner in which there lay revealed in them the story of the years over which they ran. To a stranger, I am sure, they would be full of meaning; but to me, who lived so near him through so much of the time, how truly pregnant does each briefest entry seem.

To Messrs. Oldbuck & Sons they, alas! often came to be but so many accounts rendered; to you, being a philosopher, they would, as I have said, mean more; but to me they mean all that great sunrise, the youth of Narcissus.

Many modern poets, still young enough, are fond of telling us where their youth lies buried. That of Narcissus—would ye know—rests among these old accounts. Lo! I would perform an incantation. I throw these old leaves into the *elixir vitæ* of sweet memory, as Dr. Heidegger that old rose into his wonderful crystal water. Have I power to make Narcissus' rose to bloom again, so that you may know something of the beauty it wore for us? I wonder. I would I had. I must try.

CHAPTER II.

Still Introductory, but this Time of a Greater than the Writer.

ON the left-hand side of Tithefields, just as one turns out of Prince Street, in a certain well-known Lancashire town, is the unobtrusive bookshop of Mr. Samuel Dale. It must, however, be a very superficial glance which does not discover in it something characteristic, distinguishing it from other "second-hand" shops of the same size and style.

There are, alas! treatises on farriery in the window; geographies, chemistries, and French grammars, on the trestles outside; for Samuel, albeit so great a philosopher as indeed to have founded quite a school, must nevertheless live. Those two cigars and that "noggin" of whiskey, which he purchases

with such a fine solemnity as he and I go home together for occasional symposia in his bachelor lodging—those, I say, come not without sale of such treatises, such geographies, chemistries, and French grammars.

But I am digressing. There is a distinguishing air, I but meant to say, about the little shop. Looking closer, one generally finds that it comes of a choice bit of old binding, or the quaint title-page of some tuneful Elizabethan. It was an old Crashaw that first drew me inside; and, though for some reason I did not buy it then, I bought it a year after, because to it I owed the friendship of Samuel Dale.

And thus for three bright years that little shop came to be, for a daily hour or so, a blessed palm-tree away from the burden and heat of the noon, a holy place whither the money-changers and such as sold doves might never come, let their clamour in the outer courts ring never so loud. There in Samuel's talk did two weary-hearted bond-servants of Egypt draw a breath of the Infinite into their

lives of the desk; there could they sit awhile by the eternal springs and feel the beating of the central heart.

So it happened one afternoon, about five years ago, that I dropped in there according to wont. But Samuel was engaged with some one in that dim corner at the far end of the shop, where his desk and arm-chair, tripod of that new philosophy, stood: so I turned to a neighbouring shelf to fill the time. At first I did not notice his visitor; but as, in taking down this book and that, I had come nearer to the talkers, I was struck with something familiar in the voice of the stranger. It came upon me like an old song, and looking up—why, of course, it was Narcissus!

The letter N does not make one of the initials on the Gladstone bag which he had with him on that occasion, and which, filled with books, lay open on the floor close by; nor does it appear on any of those tobacco-pouches, cigar-cases, or handkerchiefs with which men beloved of fair women are familiar.

And Narcissus might, moreover, truthfully say that *it* has never appeared upon any manner of stamped paper coming under a certain notable Act.

To be less indulgent to a vice from which the Reader will, I fear, have too frequent occasion to suffer in these pages, and for which he may have a stronger term than digression, let me at once say that Narcissus is but the name Love knew him by, Love and the Reader; for that name by which he was known to the postman—and others—is no necessity here. How and why he came to be so named will appear soon enough.

Yes! it was the same old Narcissus, and he was wielding just the same old magic, I could see, as in our class-rooms and playgrounds five years before. What is it in him that made all men take him so on his own terms, made his talk hold one so, though it so often stumbled in the dark, and fell dumb on many a verbal *cul-de-sac?* Whatever it is, Samuel felt it, and, with that fine worshipful spirit of his—an attitude which

always reminds me of the elders listening to the boy Jesus—was doing that homage for which no beauty or greatness ever appeals to him in vain. What an eye for soul has Samuel! How inevitably it pierces through all husks and excrescences to the central beauty! In that short talk he knew Narcissus through and through; three years or thirty years could add but little. But the talk was not ended yet; indeed, it seemed like so many of those Tithefields talks, as if in the "eternal fitness of things" it never could, would, or should end. It was I at last who gave it pause, and—yes! indeed, it was he. We had, somehow, not met for quite three years, chums as we had been at school. He had left there for an office some time before I did, and, oddly enough, this was our first meeting since then. A purchaser for one of those aforesaid treatises on farriery just then coming in, dislodged us; so, bidding Samuel good-bye—he and Narcissus already arranging for "a night"—we obeyed a mutual instinct, and presently

found ourselves in the snuggery of a quaint tavern, which was often to figure hereafter in our sentimental history, though probably little in these particular chapters of it. The things " seen done at ' The Mermaid ' " may some day be written in another place, where the Reader will know from the beginning what to expect, and not feel that he has been induced to buy a volume under false pretences.

CHAPTER III.

In which Narcissus Opens his "Gladstone."

THOUGH it was so long since we had met—is not three years indeed "so long" in youth?—we had hardly to wait for our second glass to be again *en rapport*. Few men grow so rapidly as Narcissus did in those young days, but fewer still can look back on old enthusiasms and superannuated ideals with a tenderness so delicately considerate. Most men hasten to witness their present altitude by kicking away the old ladders on the first opportunity; like vulgar lovers, they seek to flatter to-day at the expense of yesterday. But Narcissus was of another fibre; he could as soon have insulted the memory of his first love.

So, before long, we had passed together

into a sweet necropolis of dreams, whither, if the Reader care, I will soon take him by the hand. But just now I would have him concern himself with the afternoon of which I write, in that sad tense, the past present. Indeed, we did not ourselves tarry long among the shades, for we were young, and youth has little use for the preterite; its verbs are wont to have but two tenses. We soon came up to the surface in one, with eyes turned instinctively on the other.

Narcissus' bag seemed, somehow, a symbol; and I had caught sight of a binding or two as it lay open in Tithefields that made me curious to see it open again. He was only beginning to collect when we had parted at school, if "collect" is not too sacred a word: beginning to *buy* more truly expresses that first glutting of the bookish hunger, which, like the natural appetite, never passes in some beyond the primary utilitarian stage of "eating to live," otherwise "buying to read." Three years, however, works miracles of refinement in any hunger that is at all capable of

culture; and it was evident, when Narcissus did open his "Gladstone," that it had taken him by no means so long to attain that sublimation of taste which may be expressed as "reading to buy." Each volume had that air—of breeding, one might almost say—by which one can always know a genuine *bouquin* at a glance; an alluvial richness of bloom, coming upon one like an aromatic fragrance in so many old things, in old lawns, in old flowers, old wines, and many another delicious simile. One could not but feel that each had turned its golden brown, just as an apple reddens—as, indeed, it had.

I do not propose to solemnly enumerate and laboriously describe these good things, because I hardly think they would serve to distinguish Narcissus, except in respect of luck, from other bookmen in the first furor of bookish enthusiasm. They were such volumes as Mr. Pendennis ran up accounts for at Oxford. Narcissus had many other points in common with that gentleman. Such volumes as, morning after morning, sadden one's

breakfast-table in that Tantalus *menû*, the catalogue. Black letter, early printed, first editions Elizabethan and Victorian, every poor fly ambered in large paper, etc. etc.; in short, he ran through the gamut of that craze which takes its turn in due time with marbles, peg-tops, beetles, and foreign stamps—with probably the two exceptions of Bewick, for whom he could never batter up an enthusiasm, and "facetiæ." These latter needed too much camphor, he used to say.

His two most cherished possessions were a fine copy of the *Stultitiæ Laus*, printed by Froben, which had once been given by William Burton, the historian, to his brother Robert, when the latter was a youngster of twenty; and a first edition of one of Walton's lives, "a presentation copy from the author." The former was rich with the autographs and marginalia of both brothers, and on the latter a friend of his has already hung a tale, which may or may not be known to the Reader. In the reverent handling of these treasures, two questions inevitably forced themselves

upon me: where the d——l Narcissus, an apprentice, with an allowance that would hardly keep most of us in tobacco, had found the money for such indulgences; and how he could find in his heart to sell them again so soon. A sorrowful interjection, as he closed his bag, explained all:

"Yes!" he sighed, "they have cost me thirty pounds, and guess how much I have been offered for them?"

I suggested ten.

"Five," groaned my poor friend. "I tried several to get that. 'H'm,' says each one, indifferently turning the most precious in his hand, 'this would hardly be any use to me; and this I might have to keep months before I could sell. That I could make you an offer for; what have you thought of for it?' With a great tugging at your heart, and well-nigh in tears, you name the absurdest minimum. You had given five; you halve it—surely you can get that! But 'O no! I can give nothing like that figure. In that case it is no use to talk of it.' In despair you cry,

'Well, what will you offer?' with a choking voice. 'Fifteen shillings would be about my figure for it,' answers the fiend, relentless as a machine—and so on."

"I tried pawning them at first," he continued, "because there was hope of getting them back some time that way; but, trudging from shop to shop, with many prayers, 'a sovereign for the lot' was all I could get. Worse than dress-clothes!" concluded the frank creature.

For Narcissus to be in debt was nothing new: he had always been so at school, and probably always will be. Had you reproached him with it in those young self-conscious days of glorious absurdity, he would probably have retorted, with a toss of his vain young head:

"Well, and so was Shelley!"

I ventured to enquire the present difficulty that compelled him to make sacrifice of things so dear.

"Why, to pay for them, of course," was the answer.

And so I first became initiated into the mad method by which Narcissus had such a library about him at twenty-one. From some unexplained reason, largely, I have little doubt, on account of the charm of his manners, he had the easy credit of those respectable booksellers to whom reference has been made above. No extravagance seemed to shake their confidence. I remember calling upon them with him one day some months following that afternoon—for the madness, as usual, would have its time, and no sufferings seemed to teach him prudence—and he took me up to a certain "fine set" that he had actually resisted, he said, for a fortnight. Alas! I knew what that meant. Yes, he must have it; it was just the thing to help him with a something he was writing—"not to read you know, but to make an atmosphere," etc. So he used to talk; and the odd thing was, that we always took the wildness seriously; he seemed to make us see just what he wanted. "I say, John," was the next I heard, at the other end of the shop,

"will you kindly send me round that set of" so-and-so, "and charge it to my account?" "John," the son of old Oldbuck, and for a short time a sort of friend of Narcissus, would answer, "Certainly," with a voice of the most cheerful trust; and yet, when we had gone, it was indeed no less a sum than £10, 10s, which he added to the left-hand side of Mr. N.'s account.

Do not mistake this for a certain vulgar quality, with a vulgar little name of five letters. No one could have less of that than Narcissus. He was often, on the contrary, quite painfully diffident. No, it was not "cheek," Reader; it was a kind of irrational innocence. I don't think it ever occurred to him, till the bills came in at the half-years, what "charge it to my account" really meant. Perhaps it was because, poor lad, he had so small a practical acquaintance with it, that he knew so little the value of money. But how he suffered when those accounts did come in! Of course, there was nothing to be done but to apply to some long-suffering

friend; denials of lunch and threadbare coats but nibbled at the amount—especially as a fast to-day often found revulsion in a festival to-morrow. To save was not in Narcissus.

I promised to digress, Reader, and I have kept my word. Now to return to that afternoon again. It so chanced that on that day in the year I happened to have in my pocket —what you might meet me every day in five years without finding there—a ten-pound note. It was for this I felt after we had been musing awhile—Narcissus, probably, on everything else in the world except his debts —and it was with this I awoke him from his reverie. He looked at his hand, and then at me, in bewilderment. Poor fellow, how he wanted to keep it, yet how he tried to look as if he could n't think of doing so. He could n't help his joy shining through.

"But I want you to take it," I said; "believe me, I have no immediate need of it, and you can pay me at your leisure." Ten pounds towards the keep of a poet once in a lifetime is, after all, but little interest on the gold he

brings us. At last I "prevailed," shall I say? but on no account without the solemnity of an I.O.U. and a fixed date for repayment, on which matter poor N. was always extremely emphatic. Alas! Mr. George Meredith has already told us how this passionate anxiety to be bound by the heaven above, the earth, and the waters under the earth, is the most fatal symptom by which to know the confirmed in this kind. Captain Costigan had it, it may be remembered; and the same solicitude, the same tearful gratitude, I know, accompanied every such transaction of my poor Narcissus.

Whether it was as apparent on the due date, or whether of that ten pounds I have ever looked upon the like again, is surely no affair of the Reader's; but, lest he should do my friend an injustice, I had better say—I have n't.

CHAPTER IV.

Accounts Rendered.

NOTHING strikes one more in looking back, either on our own lives or on those of others, how little we assimilate from the greatest experiences; in nothing is Nature's apparent wastefulness of means more ironically impressive. A great love comes and sets one's whole being singing like a harp, fills high heaven with rainbows, and makes our dingy alleys for awhile bright as the streets of the New Jerusalem; and yet, if five years after we seek for what its incandescence has left us, we find, maybe, a newly helpful epithet, maybe a fancy, at most a sonnet. Nothing strikes one more, unless, perhaps, the obverse, when we see some trifling pebble-cast ripple into eternity, some fateful second prolific as the fly aphis. And

so I find it all again exampled in these old accounts. The books that mean most for Narcissus to-day could be carried in the hand without a strap, and could probably be bought for a sovereign. The rest have survived as a quaint cadence in his style, have left clinging about his thought a delicate incense of mysticism, or are bound up in the retrospective tenderness of boyish loves long since gone to dream.

Another observation in the same line of reflection also must often strike one:—for what very different qualities than those for which we were first passionate do we come afterwards to value our old enthusiasms. In the day of their bloom it was the thing itself, the craze, the study, for its own sake; now it is the discipline, or any broad human culture, in which they may have been influential. The boy chases the butterfly, and thinks not of the wood and the blue heaven; but those only does the man remember, for the mark of their beauty upon him, so unconsciously impressed, for the health of their power and

sweetness still living in his blood—for these does that chase seem alone of worth, when the dusty entomological relic thereof is in limbo. And so that long and costly shelf, groaning beneath the weight of Grose and Dugdale, and many a mighty slab of topographical prose; those pilgrimages to remote parish churches, with all their attendant ardours of careful "rubbings"; those notebooks, filled with patient data; those long letters to brother antiquaries—of sixteen; even that famous Exshire Tour itself, which was to have rivalled Pennant's own—what remains to show where this old passion stood, with all the clustering foliage of a dream; what but that quaint cadence I spoke of, and an anecdote or two which seemed but of little import then, with such breathless business afoot as an old font or a Roman road?

One particular Roman road, I know, is but remembered now, because, in the rich twilight of an old June evening, it led up the gorsy stretches of Lancashire "Heights" to a solemn plateau, wide and solitary as Salis-

bury Plain, from the dark border of which, a warm human note against the lonely infinite of heath and sky, beamed the little white-washed "Traveller's Rest," its yellow light, growing stronger as the dusk deepened, meeting the eye with a sense of companionship becoming a vague need just then.

The seeming spiritual significance of such forlorn wastes of no-man's land had, I know, a specially strong appeal for Narcissus, and, in some moods, the challenge which they seem to call from some "dark tower" of spiritual adventure would have led him wandering there till star-light; but a day of rambling alone, in a strange country, among unknown faces, brings a social hunger by evening, and a craving for some one to speak to and a voice in return becomes almost a fear. A bright kitchen-parlour, warm with the health of six workmen, grouped round a game of dominoes, and one huge quart pot of ale, used among them as woman in the early world, was a grateful inglenook, indeed, wherein to close the day. Of course, friend

N. joined them, and took his pull and paid his round, like a Walt Whitman. I like to think of his slight figure amongst them; his delicate, almost girl-like, profile against theirs; his dreamy eyes and pale brow, surmounted by one of those dark clusters of hair in which the fingers of women love to creep—an incongruity, though of surfaces only, which certain who knew him but "by sight," as the phrase is, might be at a loss to understand. That was one of the surprises of his constitution. Nature had given him the dainty and dreamy form of the artist, to which habit had added a bookish touch, ending in a *tout ensemble* of gentleness and distinction with little apparent affinity to a scene like that in the "Traveller's Rest." But there are many whom a suspicion of the dilettante in such an exterior belies, and Narcissus was one of them. He had very strongly developed that instinct of manner to which sympathy is a daily courtesy, and he thus readily, when it suited him, could take the complexion of his company, and his

capacity of "bend" was well-nigh genius. Of course, all this is but to say that he was a gentleman; yet is not that in itself a fine kind of originality? Besides, he had a genuine appetite for the things of earth, such as many another delicate thing—a damask rose-bush, for example—must be convicted of too; and often, when some one has asked him "what he could have in common with so-and-so," I have heard him answer: "Tobacco and beer." Samuel Dale once described him as Shelley with a chin; and perhaps the chin accounted for the absence of any of those sentimental scruples with regard to beef-steaks and certain varieties of jokes, for which the saint-like deserter of Harriet Westbrook was distinguished.

A supremely quaint instance of this gift of accommodation befell during that same holiday, which should not pass unrecorded, but which I offer to the Reader with an emphatic *Honi soit qui mal y pense.* Despairing of reaching a certain large manufacturing town on foot in time to put up there, one

evening, he was doing the last mile or two by rail, and, as the train slackened speed he turned to his companions in the carriage to enquire if they could tell him of a good hotel. He had but carelessly noticed them before: an old man, a slight young woman of perhaps thirty, and a girl about fifteen; working people, evidently, but marked by that air of cleanly poverty which in some seems but a touch of ascetic refinement. The young woman at once mentioned *The Bull* and thereupon a little embarrassed consultation in undertone seemed to pass between her and the old man, resulting in a timid question as to whether Narcissus would mind putting up with them, as they were poor folk, and could well do with any little he cared to offer for his accommodation. There was something of a sad winningness in the woman which had predisposed him to the group, and without hesitation he at once accepted, and soon was walking with them to their home, through streets echoing with Lancashire "clogs." On the way he learnt

the circumstances of his companions. The young woman was a widow, and the girl her daughter. Both worked through the day at one of the great cotton mills, while the old man, father and grandfather, stayed at home and "fended" for them. Thus they managed to live in a comfort which, though straitened, did not deny them such an occasional holiday as to-day had been, or the old man the comfort of tobacco. The home was very small, but clean and sweet; and it was not long before they were all sat down together over a tea of wholesome bread and butter and eggs, in the preparation of which it seemed odd to see the old man taking his share. That over, he and Narcissus sat to smoke and talk of the neighbouring countryside; N. on the look-out for folk-lore, and especially for any signs in his companion of a lingering loyalty of belief in the traditions thereabout, a loyalty which had something in it of a sacred duty to him in those days. Those were the days when he still turned to the east a-Sundays, and went out in the early

morning, with Herrick under his arm, to gather May-dew, with a great uplifting of the spirit, in what indeed was a very real act of worship.

But to my story! As bedtime approached Narcissus could not but be aware of a growing uneasiness in the manner of the young woman. At last it was explained. With blushing effort she stammered out the question: Would he object to share his bed with —the old man? "Of course not," answered N. at once, as though he had all the time intended doing that very thing, and indeed, thought it the most delightful arrangement in the world.

So up to bed go the oddly consorted pair. But the delicious climax was yet to come. On entering the room, Narcissus found that there were two beds there! Why should we leave that other bed empty?—he had almost asked; but a laughing wonder shot through him, and he stopped in time.

The old man was soon among the blankets, but Narcissus dallied over undressing, looking at this and that country quaintness on

the wall; and then, while he was in a state of half man and half trousers, the voice of the woman called from the foot of the stairs: Were they in bed yet? "Surely, it cannot be! it is too irresistibly simple," was his thought: but he had immediately answered, "In a moment," as if such a question was quite a matter of course.

In that space he had blown the candle out, and was by the old man's side: and then, in the darkness, he heard the two women ascending the stairs. Just outside his door, which he had left ajar, they seemed to turn off into a small adjoining room, from whence came immediately the soft delicious sounds of female disrobing. They were but factory women, yet Narcissus thought of Saint Agnes and Madeline, we may be sure. And then, at last—indeed, there was to be no mistake about it—the door was softly pushed open, and two dim forms whispered across to the adjoining bed, and, after a little preliminary rustle, settled down to a rather fluttered breathing.

No one had spoken: not even a Good-night; but Narcissus could hardly refrain from ringing out a great mirthful cry, while his heart beat strangely, and the darkness seemed to ripple, like sunlight in a cup, with suppressed laughter. The thought of the little innocent deception as to their sleeping-room, which poverty had caused them to practise, probably held the breath of the women, while the shyness of sex was a common bond of silence—at least, on the part of the three younger. It was long before Narcissus was able to fall asleep, for he kept picturing the elder woman with burning cheek and open eyes in a kind of "listening fear" beneath the coverlet; and the oddity of the thing was so original, so like some *conte* of a *Decameron* or *Heptameron*, with the wickedness left out. But at last wonder gave place to weariness, and sleep began to make a still odder magic of the situation. The difficulty of meeting at breakfast next morning, which had at once suggested itself to N.'s mind, proved a vain fear; for, when

he arose, that other bed was as smooth as though it had lain untouched through the night, and the daughters of labour had been gone two hours. But it was not quite without sign that they had gone, for Narcissus had a dreamlike impression of opening his eyes in the early light to find a sweet woman's face leaning over him; and I am sure he wanted to believe that it had bent down still further, till it had kissed his lips—"for his mother's sake," she had said in her heart, as she slipped away and was seen no more.

"If this were fiction, instead of a veracious study from life," to make use of a phrase which one rarely finds out of a novel, it would be unfitting to let such an incident as that just related fall to the ground, except as the seed of future development; but, this being as I have stated, there is nothing more to say of that winning *ouvrière*. Narcissus saw her no more.

But surely, of all men, he could best afford that one such pleasant chance should put forth no other blossom save that half-

dreamed kiss;—and how can one ever foresee but that our so cherishable spray of bloom may in time add but another branch to that orchard of Dead Sea fruit which grows inevitably about all men's dwellings?

I do not suppose that Narcissus was really as exceptional in the number and character of his numerous boyish loves as we always regarded him as being. It is no uncommon matter, of course and alas! for a youth between the ages of seventeen and nineteen to play the juggler at keeping three, or even half-a-dozen, female correspondents going at once, each of whom sleeps nightly with copious documentary evidence of her sole and incontrovertible possession of the sacred heart. Nor has Narcissus been the only lover, I suspect, who, in the season of the waning of the moon, has sent such excuses for scrappy epistolary make-shifts as "the strident din of an office, an air so cruelly unsympathetic, as frost to buds, to the blossoming of all those words of love that press for birth," when, as a matter of fact, he has been unblushingly

eating the lotus, in the laziest chair at home, in the quietest night of summer. Such insincerity is a common besetting sin of the young male; invariably, I almost think, if he has the artistic temperament. Yet I do not think it presents itself to his mind in its nudity, but comes clothed with that sophistry in which youth, the most thoroughgoing of *philosophes*, is so ingenious. Consideration for the beloved object, it is called—yes! beloved indeed, though such is the paradox in the order of things, but one of the several vestals of the sacred fire. One cannot help occasional disinclination on a lazy evening, confound it! but it makes one twinge to think of paining her with such a confession; and a story of that sort—well, it 's a lie, of course; but it 's one without any harm, any seed of potential ill, in it. So the letter goes, maybe to take its place as the 150th of the sacred writings, and make poor Daffodilia, who has loved to count the growing score, happy with the completion of the half-century.

But the disinclination goes not, though the poor passion has, of course, its occasional leapings in the socket, and the pain has to come at last, for all that dainty consideration, which, moreover, has been all the time feeding larger capacities for suffering. For, of course, no man thinks of marrying his twelfth love, though in the thirteenth there is usually danger; and he who has jilted, so to say, an earl's daughter as his sixth, may come to see

> "The God of Love, ah ! benedicite,
> How mighty and how great a lord is he"

in the thirteenth Miss Simpkins.

But this is to write as an outsider: for that thirteenth, by a mystical process which has given to each of its series in its day the same primal quality, is, of course, not only the last, but the first. And, indeed, with little casuistry, that thirteenth may be truly held to be the first, for it is a fact determined not so much by the chosen maid as by him who chooses, though he himself is persuaded quite otherwise. To him his amorous career has

been hitherto an unsuccessful pursuit, because each followed fair in turn, when at length he has caught her flying skirts, and looked into her face, has proved not that "ideal"—

> "That not impossible she
> That shall command my heart and me"—

but another, to be shaken free again in disappointment. In truth, however, the lack has been in himself all this time. He had yet to learn what loving indeed meant: and he loves the thirteenth, not because she is pre-eminent beyond the rest, but because she has come to him at the moment when that "lore of loving" has been revealed. Had any of those earlier maidens fallen on the happy conjunction, they would, doubtless, have proved no less loveworthy, and seemed no less that "ideal" which they have since become, one may be sure, for some other illuminated soul.

Of course, some find that love early—the baby-love, whom one never marries, and then the faithful service. Probably it happens so

with the majority of men; for it is, I think, especially to the artist nature that it comes thus late. Living so vividly within the circle of its own experience, by its very constitution so necessarily egoistic, the latter, more particularly in its early years, is always a Narcissus, caring for nought or none except in so much as they reflect back its own beauty or its own dreams. The face such a youth looks for, as he turns the coy captured head to meet his glance, is, quite unconsciously, his own, and the "ideal" he seeks is but the perfect mirror. Yet it is not that mirror he marries after all: for when at last he has come to know what that word—one so distasteful, so "soiled" to his ear "with all ignoble" domesticity—what that word "wife" really expresses, he has learnt, too, to discredit those cynical guides of his youth who love so well to write Ego as the last word of human nature.

But the particular Narcissus of whom I write was a long way off that thirteenth maid in the days of his antiquarian rambles and his Pagan-Catholic ardours, and the above digression is at least out of date.

A copy of Keats which I have by me as I write is a memorial of one of the pretty loves typical of that period. It is marked all through in black lead—not so gracefully as one would have expected from the "taper fingers" which held the pencil, but rather, it would appear, more with regard to emphasis than grace. Narcissus had lent it to the queen of the hour with special instructions to that end, so that when it came to him again he might ravish his soul with the hugging assurance given by the thick lead to certain ecstatic lines of *Endymion*, such as—

> "My soul doth melt
> For the unhappy youth";
> "He surely cannot now
> Thirst for another love";

and luxuriate in a genial sense of godship where the tremulous pencil had left the record of a sigh against—

> "Each tender maiden whom he once thought fair."

But it was a magnanimous godship; and, after a moment's leaning back with closed eyes, to draw in all the sweet incense, how

nobly would he act, in imaginative vignette, the King Cophetua to this poor suppliant of love; with what a generous waiving of his power—and with what a grace!—did he see himself raising her from her knees, and seating her at his right hand. Yet those pencil-marks, alas! mark but a secondary interest in that volume. A little sketch on the fly-leaf, "by another hand," witness the prettier memory. A sacred valley, guarded by smooth, green hills; in the midst a little lake, fed at one end by a singing stream, swallowed at the other by the roaring darkness of a mill; green rushes prosperous in the shallows, and along the other bank an old hedgerow; a little island in the midst, circled by silver lilies; and in the distance, rising from out a cloud of tangled green, above the little river, an old church tower. Below, though not "in the picture," a quaint country house, surrounded by a garden of fair fruit-trees and wonderful bowers, through which ran the stream, free once again, and singing for joy of the light. In the great

lone house a solitary old man, cherished and ruled by—"The Miller's Daughter." Was scene ever more in need of a fairy prince? Narcissus sighed, as he broke upon it one rosy evening, to think what little meaning all its beauty had, suffering that lack; but as he had come thither with the purpose, at once firm and vague, of giving it a memory, he could afford to sigh till morning's light brought, maybe, the opportunity of that transfiguring action. He was to spend an Easter fortnight there, as the guest of some farmer-relatives with whom he had stayed years before, in a period to which, being nineteen, he already alluded as his "boyhood."

And it is not quite accurate to say that it had no memory for him, for he brought with him one of that very miller's daughter, though, indeed, it was of the shadowiest silver. It had chanced at that early time that an influx of visitors to the farm had exceeded the sleeping room, and he and another little fellow had been provided with a bed in the miller's house. He had never

quite forgotten that bedroom—its hugh old-fashioned four-poster, slumbrous with great dark hangings, such as Queen Elizabeth seems always to have slept in; its walls dim with tapestry, and its screen of antique bead-work. But it was round the toilet table that memory grew brightest, for thereon was a crystal phial of a most marvellous perfume, and two great mother-of-pearl shells, shedding a mystical radiance—the most commonplace Rimmel's, without doubt, and the shells "dreadful," one may be sure. But to him, as he took a reverent breath of that phial, it seemed the very sweetbriar fragrance of her gown that caught his sense; and, surely, he never in all the world found scent like that again. Thus, long after, she would come to him in day-dreams, wafted on its strange sweetness, and clothed about with that mystical lustre of pearl.

There were five years between him and that memory as he stepped into that enchanted land for the second time. The sweet figure of young womanhood to which

he had turned his boyish soul in hopeless worship, when it should have been busied rather with birds' nests and rabbit-snares, had, it is true, come to him in dimmer outline each Spring, but with magic the deeper for that. As the form faded from the silver halo, and passed more and more into mythology, it seemed, indeed, as if she had never lived for him at all, save in dreams, or on another star. Still, his memory held by those great shells, and he had come at last to the fabled country on the perilous quest—who of us dare venture such a one to-day?—of a "lost saint." Enquiry of his friends that evening, cautious as of one on some half-suspected diplomacy, told him that one with the name of his remembrance did live at the mill-house—with an old father, too. But how all the beauty of the singing morning became a scentless flower when, on making the earliest possible call, he was met at the door with that hollow word, "Away"—a word that seemed to echo through long rooms of infinite emptiness and turn the day-

light shabby—till the addendum, "for the day," set the birds singing again, and called the sunshine back.

A few nights after he was sitting at her side, by a half-opened window, with his arm about her waist, and her head thrillingly near his. With his pretty gift of recitation he was pouring into her ear that sugared passage in *Endymion*, appropriately beginning, "O known unknown," previously "got up" for the purpose; but alas! not perfectly to prevent a break-down, though, fortunately, at a point that admitted a ready turn to the dilemma:

"Still
Let me entwine thee surer, surer...."

Here exigency compelled N. to make surety doubly, yea, trebly, sure; but memory still forsaking him, the rascal, having put deeper and deeper significance into his voice with each repetition, dropped it altogether as he drew her close to him, and seemed to fail from the very excess of love. An hour after, he was bounding into the moonlight in an

intoxication of triumph. She was won. The beckoning wonder had come down to him. And yet it was real moonlight—was not that his own grace in silhouette, making a mirror even of the hard road?—real grass over which he had softly stept from her window, real trees, all real, except—yes! was it real love?

In the lives of all passionate lovers of women there are two broadly marked periods, and in some a third: slavery, lordship, and service. The first is the briefest, and the third, perhaps, seldom comes; the second is the most familiar.

Awakening, like our forefather, from the deep sleep of childish things, the boy finds a being by his side of a strange hushing fairness, as though in the night he had opened his eyes and found an angel by his bed. Speech he has not at all, and his glance dare not rise beyond her bosom; till, the presence seeming gracious, he dares at length stretch out his hand and touch her gown; whereon an inexplicable new joy trembles through him, as though he stood

naked in a May meadow through the golden rain of a summer shower. Should her fingers touch his arm by chance, it is as though they swept a harp, and a music of piercing sweetness runs with a sudden cry along his blood. But by and by he comes to learn that he has made a comical mistake about his wonder. With his head bent low in worship, he had not seen the wistfulness of her gaze on him; and one day, lo! it is she who presses close to him with the timid appeal of a fawn. Indeed, she has all this time been to him as some beautiful woodland creature might have seemed, breaking for the first time upon the sight of primitive man. Fear, wonder inexpressible, worship, till a sudden laughing thought of comprehension, then a lordly protectiveness, and, after that—the hunt! At once the masculine self-respect returns, and the wonder, though no less sweet in itself, becomes but another form of tribute.

With Narcissus this evolution had taken place early: it was very long ago—he felt old even then to think of it—since Hesperus

had sung like a nightingale above his first kiss, and his memory counted many trophies of lordship. But, surely, this last was of all the starriest; perhaps, indeed, so wonderful was it, it might prove the very love which would bring back again the dream that had seemed lost for ever with the passing of that mythical first maid so long ago, a love in which worship should be all once more, and godship none at all. But is not such a question all too certainly its own answer? Nay, Narcissus, if indeed you find that wonder-maid again, you will not question so; you will forget to watch that graceful shadow in the moonlight; you will but ask to sit by her silent, as of old, to follow her to the end of the world. Ah me!

" How many queens have ruled and passed
Since first we met;
How thick and fast
The letters used to come at first,
How thin at last;
Then ceased, and winter for a space!
Until another hand
Brought spring into the land,
Aud went the seasons' pace,"

That Miller's Daughter, although "so dear, so dear," why, of course, she was not that maid: but again the silver halo has grown about her; again Narcissus asks himself, "Did she live, or did I dream?"; again she comes to him at whiles, wafted on that strange incense, and clothed about in that mystical lustre of pearl.

Doubtless, she lives in that fabled country still: but Narcissus has grown sadly wise since then, and he goes on pilgrimage no more.

CHAPTER V.

An Idyll of Alice Sunshine, which really Belongs to the last Chapter.

IF the Reader has heard enough of the amourettes of the young gentleman upon whose memoirs I am engaged, let him skip this chapter and pass to the graver chapters beyond. My one aim is the Reader's pleasure, and I carry my solicitude so far that if he finds his happiness to lie outside these pages altogether, has no choice among these various chapters, but prefers none to any, I am quite content. Such a spirit of self-abnegation, the Reader must admit, is true love.

Perhaps it was an early unconscious birth-impulse of the true love some day to be born in his heart, that caused Narcissus to make a confession to his Miller's Daughter, on one of their pretty decorative evenings, when

they sat together at the fireside, while the scent of the climbing roses, and the light of the climbing moon, came in at the window.

The immediate effect of the confession was—no wonder—to draw tears. And how beautiful she looked in tears! Who would dive for pearls when the pearl-fisheries of a woman's eyes are his to rifle?

Beautiful, beautiful tears, flow on—no dull, leaden rain, no mere monotonous deluge, but a living, singing fountain, crowned with such rainbows as hang roses and stars in the fine mist of samite waterfalls, irradiated by gleaming shafts of lovely anger and scorn.

Like Northern Lights on autumn evenings, the maiden's eyes pierced Narcissus through and through with many-coloured spears. There was thunder, too; the earth shook —just a little: but soon Narcissus saw the white dove of peace flying to him through the glancing showers. For all her sorrow, his was the peace of confession. His little lie had been acknowledged, his treason self-betrayed.

And it was this.

I have hinted that Narcissus, like the Catholic Church, worshipped many saints. At this time, one of them, by a thrilling coincidence, chanced to have her shrine at a boarding-school, some fifteen miles or so from the mill-pond on whose banks the Miller's Daughter had drawn into her lovely face so much of the beauty of the world. Alice Sunshine, shall we call her, was perhaps more of a cherub than a saint; a rosy, laughing, plump little arrangement of sunshiny pink and white flesh, with blue eyes and golden hair. Alice was not over-burdened with intellectuality, and, like others of her sex, her heart was nothing like so soft as her bosom. Narcissus had first been in love with her sister; but he and the sister—a budding woman of the world—had soon agreed that they were not born for each other, and Narcissus had made the transfer of his tragic passion with inexpensive informality. As the late Anthony Trollope would finish one novel to-night, and begin another to-morrow morning,

so would Narcissus be off with the old love this Sunday, and visibly on with the new the next.

Dear little plump, vegetable-marrow Alice! Will Narcissus ever forget that Sunday night when the church, having at last released its weary worshippers, he stole, not as aforetime to the soft side of Emily, but to the still softer side of the little bewildered Alice. For, though Alice had worshipped him all the time, and certainly during the whole of the service, she had never dared to hope that he would pass her dashing, dark-eyed sister to love *her*—little, blonde, phlegmatic, blue-eyed Alice.

But Apollo was bent on the capture of his Daphne. Truth to say, it was but the work of a moment. The golden arrow was in her heart, the wound kissed whole again, and the new heaven and the new earth all arranged for, in hardly longer time than it takes to tell.

In youth the mystery of woman is still so fresh and new, that to make a fuss about a

particular woman seems like looking a gift-horse of the gods in the mouth. The light on the face of womanhood in general is so bewilderingly beautiful that the young man literally cannot tell one woman from another. They are all equally wonderful. Masculine observation leads one to suppose that woman's first vision of man similarly precludes discrimination.

Ah me! it is easy to laugh to-day, but it was heart-bleeding tragedy when those powers that oughtn't to be decreed Alice's exile to a boarding-school in some central Africa of the midland counties.

The hemorrhage of those two young hearts! But, for a time, each plastered the other's wounds with letters—dear letters—letters every post. For the postal authorities made no objection to Narcissus corresponding with two or more maidens at once. And it is only fair to Alice to say, that she knew as little of the Miller's Daughter as the Miller's Daughter knew of her.

So, when Narcissus was reciting *Endymion*

to his Miller's Maid, it was not without a minor chord plaining through the major harmonies of the present happiness; the sense that Alice was but fifteen miles away—so near she could almost hear him if he called —only fifteen miles away, and it was a long three months since they had met.

It now becomes necessary to admit a prosaic fact hitherto concealed from the Reader. Narcissus rode a bicycle. It was, I must confess, a rather "modern" thing to do. But surely the flashing airy wheel is the most poetical mode of locomotion yet invented, and one looks more like a fairy prince than ever in knickerbockers. Whenever Narcissus turned his gleaming spokes along some mapped, but none the less mysterious, country-road, he thought of Lohengrin in his barge drawn by white swans to his mystic tryst; he thought of the seven-leagued boots, the flying carpet, the wishing-cap, and the wooden Pegasus,—so called because it mounted into the clouds on the turning of a peg. As he passed along by mead and

glade, his wheel sang to him, and he sang to his wheel. It was a daisied, daisied world.

There were buttercups and violets in it too as he sped along in the early morning of an unforgotten Easter Sunday, drawn, so he had shamelessly told his Miller's Daughter, by antiquarian passion to visit the famous old parish church near which Alice was at school. Antiquarian passion! Well, certainly it is an antiquarian passion now.

But then—how his heart beat! how his eyes shone as with burning kohl! That there was anything to be ashamed of in this stolen ride never even occurred to him. And perhaps there was little wrong in it, after all. Perhaps, when the secrets of all hearts are revealed, it will come out that the Miller's Daughter took the opportunity to meet Narcissus' understudy—who can tell?

But the wonderful fresh morning-scented air was a delicious fact beyond dispute. That was sincere. Ah, there used to be real mornings then!—not merely interrupted nights.

And it was the Easter-morning of romance. There was a sweet passionate Sabbath-feeling everywhere. Sabbath-bells, and Sabbath-birds, and Sabbath-flowers. There was even a feeling of restful Sabbath-cheer about the old inn, where, at last, entering with much awe the village where Alice nightly slept—clothed in white samite, mystic, wonderful,—Narcissus provided for the demands of romance by a hearty country breakfast. A manna of blessing seemed to lie thick upon everything. The very ham and eggs seemed as if they had been blessed by the Pope.

It was yet an hour to church-time, an hour usually one of spiteful alacrity; but this morning, it seemed, in defiance of the clock, cruelly unpunctual. After breakfast, Narcissus strolled about the town, and inquired the way to Miss Curlpaper's school. It stood outside the little town. It was pointed out to him in the distance, across billowy clouds of pear and apple-blossom, making the hollow in which the town nestled seem a

vast pot-pourri jar, overflowing with newly gathered rose-leaves.

Had the Miller's Daughter been able to watch his movements, she would have remarked that his antiquarian ardour drew him not to the church, but to a sombre many-windowed house upon the hill.

Narcissus reconnoitred the prison-like edifice from behind a hedge, then summoned courage to walk past with slow nonchalance. All was as dead and dull as though Alice was not there. Yet somewhere within those prison-walls her young beauty was dressing itself to meet the spring. Perhaps, in delicious linen, soft and white, she was dashing cool water about her rosebud face, or, flushed with exhilaration, was pinning up the golden fleeces of her hair. Perhaps she was eating wonderful bacon and eggs!

Could she be thinking of him? She little knew how near he was to her. He had not written of his coming. Letters at Miss Curlpaper's had to pass an inspection much more rigorous than the Customs, but still smug-

gling was not unknown. For success, however, carefully laid plans and regular dates were necessary, and Narcissus' visit had fallen between the dates.

No! there was no sign of her. She was as invisible as the moon at mid-day. And there were the church-bells beginning to call her: "Alice, Alice, put on your things!"

"Alice, Alice, put on your things!
The birds are calling, the church bell rings;
The sun is shining, and I am here,
Waiting—and waiting—for you, my dear.

"Alice, Alice, doff your gown of night,
Draw on your bodice as lilies white,
Draw on your petticoats, clasp your stays,—
Oh! Alice, Alice, those milky ways!

"Alice, Alice, how long you are!
The hour is late and the church is far;
Slowly, more slowly, the church bell rings—
Alice, Alice, put on your things!"

Really it was not in Narcissus' plans to wait at the school till Alice appeared. The Misses Curlpaper were terrible unknown quantities to him. For a girl to have a boy hanging about the premises was a capital crime, he knew. Boys are to girls' schools

what Anarchists are to public buildings. They come under the Explosives Acts. It was not, indeed, within the range of his hope that he might be able to speak to Alice. A look, a long, immortal, all-expressive look, was all he had travelled fifteen miles to give and win. For that he would have travelled fifteen hundred.

His idea was to sit right in front of the nave, where Alice could not miss seeing him —where others could see him too in his pretty close-fitting suit of Lincoln green. So down through the lanes he went, among the pear and apple orchards, from out whose blossom the clanging tower of the old church jutted sheer, like some Bass Rock amid rosy clustering billows. Their love had been closely associated from its beginning with the sacred things of the church, so regular had been their attendance, not only on Sundays, but at week-night services. To Alice and Narcissus there were two Sabbaths in the week, Sunday and Wednesday. I suppose they were far from being the only young

people interested in their particular form of church-work. Leander met Hero, it will be remembered, on the way to church, and the Reader may recall Marlowe's beautiful description of her dress upon that fatal morning:

> " The outside of her garments were of lawn,
> The lining purple silk, with gilt stars drawn ;
> Her wide sleeves green, and bordered with a grove,
> Where Venus in her naked glory strove
> To please the careless and disdainful eyes
> Of proud Adonis, that before her lies ;
> Her kirtle blue, whereon was many a stain,
> Made with the blood of wretched lovers slain. . . ."

Alice wore pretty dresses too, if less elaborate ; and, despite its change of name, was not the church where she and Narcissus met, as the church wherein Hero and Leander first looked upon each other, the Temple of Love? Certainly the country church to which Narcissus self-consciously passed through groups of Sunday-clothed villagers, was decked as for no Christian festival this Sabbath morning. The garlands that twined about the old Norman columns, the clumps of primroses and violets that sprung at their feet, as at the roots of gigantic beeches, the branches of palm

and black-thorn that transformed the chancel to a bower: probably for more than knew it, these symbols of the joy and beauty of earth had simpler, more instinctive meanings than those of any arbitrary creed. For others in the church besides Narcissus, no doubt, they spoke of young love, the bloom and the fragrance thereof, of mating birds and pairing men and maids, of the eternal principle of loveliness, which, in spite of winter and of wrong, brings flowers and faces to bless and beautify this church of the world.

As Narcissus sat in his front row, his eyes drawn up in a prayer to the painted glories of the great east window, his whole soul lifted up on the wings of colour, scent, and sound—the whole sacred house had but one meaning: just his love for Alice. Nothing in the world was too holy to image that. The windows, the music, the flowers, all were metaphors of her: and, as the organ swirled his soul along in the rapids of its passionate, prayerful sound, it seemed to him that Alice and he already stood at the gate of Heaven!

Presently, across his mingled sensations came a measured tramp as of boy-soldiers marching in line. You have heard it! You have *listened* for it!! It was the dear, unmistakable sound of a girls' school on the march. Quickly it came nearer, it was in the porch—it was in the church! Narcissus gave a swift glance round. He dare not give a real searching look yet. His heart beat too fast, his cheek burned too red. But he saw it was a detachment of girls—it certainly was Alice's school.

Then came the white-robed choristers, and the white-haired priests: *If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us; but, if we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.*

DEARLY BELOVED BRETHREN. . . .

His heart swelled with a sobbing exaltation of worship such as he had not known for years. You could hardly have believed that a little apple-dumpling of a pink and

white girl was the real inspirer of that look in his young face that made old ladies, even more than young ones, gaze at him, and remark afterwards on the strange boy with the lovely spiritual expression.

But, all the time, Narcissus felt that Alice's great eyes were on him, glowing with glad surprise. The service proceeded, but yet he forbore to seek her. He took a delight in husbanding his coming joy. He would not crudely snatch it. It would be all the sweeter for waiting. And the fire in Alice's eyes would all the time be growing softer and softer. He nearly looked as he thought of that. And surely that was her dear voice calling to him in the secret language of the psalm. He sang back to her with a wild rapture. Thus the morning stars sang together, he thought.

And when the prayers laid lovely hands across the eyes of the worshippers, still he sought not Alice, but prayed for her as perhaps only a boy can: "O Lord God, be good to Alice—already she is one of thy angels.

May her life be filled with light and joy. And if in the time to come I am worthy of being ever by her side, may we live our lives together, high and pure and holy as always in thy sight. Lord, thou knowest how pure is my love; how I worship her as I worship the holy angels themselves. But whatsoever is imperfect perfect by the inspiration of thy Holy Spirit. . . ."

So prayed the soul of the boy for the soul of the girl, and his eyes filled with tears as he prayed; the cup of the wonder and holiness of the world ran over.

Already, it seemed, that Alice and he lay clasped together in the arms of God.

So Narcissus prayed and sang his love in terms of an alien creed. He sang of the love of Christ, he thought but of the love of Alice; and still he refrained from plucking that wonderful passion-flower of her glance.

At length he had waited the whole service through; and, with the last hallowed vibrations of the benediction, he turned his eyes, brimful of love-light, greedily, eagerly, fear-

ful lest one single ray should be wasted on intermediate and irrelevant worshippers.

Wonderful eyes of love!—but alas! where is their Alice? Wildly they glance along the rosy ranks of chubby girlhood, but where is their Alice?

And then the ranks form in line, and once more the sound, the ecstatic sound it had seemed but a short time before, of girls marching—but no!—no!—there is no Alice.

In sick despair Narcissus stalked that Amazonian battalion, crouching behind hedges, dropping into bye-lanes, lurking in coppices, —he held his breath as they passed two and two within a yard of him. Two followed two, but still no Alice!

Narcissus lay in wait, dinnerless, all that afternoon; he walked about that dreary house like a patrol, till at last he was observed of the inmates, and knots of girls gathered at the windows—alas! only to giggle at his forlorn and desperate appearance.

Still there was no Alice—and then it began to rain, and he became aware how

hungry he was. So he returned to his inn with a sad heart.

And all the time poor little Alice lay in bed with a sore throat, oblivious of those passionate boyish eyes that, you would have thought, must have pierced the very walls of her seclusion.

And, after all, it was not her voice Narcissus had heard in the church. It was but the still sweeter voice of his own heart.

CHAPTER VI.

The Sibylline Books.

I HOPE it will be allowed to me that I treat the Reader with all respectful courtesy, and that I am well bred enough to assume him familiar with all manner of exquisite experience, though in my heart I may be no less convinced that he has probably gone through life with nothing worth calling experience whatsoever. It is our jaunty modern fashion, and I follow it so far as I am able. I take for granted, for instance, that every man has at one time or another —in his salad days, you know, before he was embarked in his particular provision business —had foolish yearnings towards poesy. I respect the mythical dreams of his "young days"; I assume that he has been really in love; but, pray press me not too curiously

as to whether I believe it all, as to whether I really imagine that his youth knew other dreams than those of the foolish young "masherdom" one meets in the train every morning, or that he has married a wife for other than purely "masculine" reasons.

These matters I do not mind leaving in the form of a postulate—let them be granted: but that every man has at one time or another had the craze for saving the world I will not assume. Narcissus took it very early, and though he has been silent concerning his mission for some time, and when last we heard of it had considerably modified his propaganda, he still cherishes it somewhere in secret, I have little doubt; and one may not be surprised, one of these days, to find it again bursting out "into sudden flame."

His spiritual experience has probably been the deepest and keenest of his life. I do not propose to trace his evolution from Anabaptism to Agnosticism. The steps of such development are comparatively familiar; they have been traced by greater pens than

mine. The "means" may vary, but the process is uniform.

Whether a man deserts the ancestral Brahminism that has so long been "good enough for his parents," and listens to the voice of the Buddhist missionary, or joins Lucian in the seat of the scornful, shrugging at augur and philosopher alike; whether it is Voltaire, or Tom Paine, or Thomas Carlyle, or Walt Whitman, or a Socialist tract, that is the emancipator, the emancipation is all one.

The seed that is to rend the rock comes in all manner of odd, and of the unremembered, ways; but somehow, it is there; rains and dews unnoticed feed it; and surely, one day the rock is rent, the light is pouring in, and we are free! It is often a matter of anguish that, strive as we may, it is impossible to remember what helping hand it was that sowed for us. Our fickle memory seems to convict us of ingratitude, and yet we know how far that sin is from us; and how, if those sowers could but be revealed to us, we would fall upon their necks, or at their feet.

I talked of this one day with Narcissus, and some time after he sent me a few notes headed "Spiritual Pastors," in which he had striven to follow the beautiful example set by Marcus Aurelius, in the anxiously loving acknowledgment with which he opens his meditations. I know he regarded it as miserably inefficient; but as it does actually indicate some of the more individual side of his experience, and is, moreover, characteristic in its style, I shall copy a few passages from it here:

"To some person or persons unknown exceeding gratitude for the suggestion, in some dim talk, antenatal it would almost seem, that Roman Catholics might, after all, be 'saved.' Blessed fecundating suggestion, that was the earliest loophole!

"To my father I owe a mind that, once set on a clue, must follow it, if need be, to the nethermost darkness, though he has chosen to restrict the operation of his own within certain limits; and to my mother a natural leaning to the transcendental side of

an alternative, which has saved me so many a time when reason had thrown me into the abyss. But one's greatest debt to a good mother must be simply—herself.

" To the Rev. Father Ignatius for his earnest preaching, which might almost have made me a monk, had not Thomas Carlyle and his *Heroes*, especially the lecture on Mahomet, given me to understand the true significance of a Messiah.

" To Bulwer for his *Zanoni*, which first gave me a hint of the possible natural ' supernatural,' and thus forever saved me from dogmatising in negatives against the transcendental.

" To Sir Edwin Arnold for his *Light of Asia* also to Mr. Sinnett for his *Esoteric Buddhism*, books which, coming to me about the same time, together with some others like them, first gave some occupation to an " unchartered freedom," gained in many forgotten steps, in the form of a faith which transfigured my life for many months into the most beautiful enthusiasm a man could

know,—and which had almost sent me to the Himalayas!

"That it did not quite achieve that, though much of the light it gave me still remains, I owe to R. M., who, with no dialectic, but with one bald question, and the reading of one poem, robbed me of my fairy palace of Oriental speculation in the twinkling of an eye. Why it went I have never really quite known; but surely, it was gone, and the wind and the bare star-light alone were in its place.

"Dear Mac., I have not seen you for ever so long, and surely you have forgotten how that night, long ago, you asked with such a strange, almost childlike, simplicity: '*Is* there a soul?' But I have not forgotten, nor how I made no answer at all, but only staggered, and how, with your strange, dreamy voice, you chanted for comfort:

"'This hot, hard flame with which our bodies burn
Will make some meadow blaze with daffodil;
Ay! and those argent breasts of thine will turn
To water-lilies; the brown fields men till

Will be more fruitful for our love to-night:
Nothing is lost in Nature; all things live in Death's despite.

.

" 'So when men bury us beneath the yew
Thy crimson-stainèd mouth a rose will be,
And thy soft eyes lush blue-bells dimmed with dew;
And when the white narcissus wantonly
Kisses the wind, its playmate, some faint joy
Will thrill our dust, and we will be again fond maid and boy.

" ' How my heart leaps up
To think of that grand living after death
In beast and bird and flower, when this cup,
Being filled too full of spirit, bursts for breath,
And with the pale leaves of some autumn day,
The soul, earth's earliest conqueror, becomes earth's last great prey.

" 'O think of it! We shall inform ourselves
Into all sensuous life; the goat-foot faun,
The centaur, or the merry, bright-eyed elves
That leave their dancing rings to spite the dawn
Upon the meadows, shall not be more near
Than you and I to Nature's mysteries, for we shall hear.

" 'The thrush's heart beat, and the daisies grow,
And the wan snowdrop sighing for the sun
On sunless days in winter; we shall know
By whom the silver gossamer is spun,
Who paints the diapered fritillaries,
On what wide wings from shivering pine to pine the eagle flies.

.

" 'We shall be notes in that great symphony
Whose cadence circles through the rhythmic spheres,
And all the live world's throbbing heart shall be
One with our heart; the stealthy, creeping years
Have lost their terrors now; we shall not die—
The universe itself shall be our Immortality!'

"Have you forgotten how you chanted these, and told me they were Oscar Wilde's? You had set my feet firmly on earth for the first time, there was great darkness with me for many weeks, but, as it lifted, the earth seemed greener than ever of old, the sunshine a goodlier thing, and verily a blessedness indeed to draw the breath of life. I had learnt 'the value and significance of flesh'; I no longer scorned a carnal diet, and once again I turned my eyes on the damsels in the street.

"But an influence soon came to me that kept me from going all the way with you, and taught me to say, 'I know not,' where you would say, 'It is not.' Blessings on thee who threw a rainbow, that may mean a promise, across the void, that awoke the old in-

stinct of faith within me, and has left me 'an Agnostic with a faith,' quite content with 'the brown earth,' if that be all, but with the added significance a mystery gives to living; —thou who first taught me Love's lore aright, to thee do I owe this thing.

"To J. A. W. I owe the first great knowledge of that other love between man and man, which Whitman has since taught us to call 'the dear love of comrades'; and to him I owe that I never burned those early rhymes, or broke my little reed—an unequivocal service to me, whatever the public, should it be consulted, may think.

"To a dear sister I owe that still more exquisite and subtle comradeship which can only exist between man and woman, but from which the more disturbing elements of sex must be absent. And here, let me also thank God that I was brought up in quite a garden of good sisters.

"To Messrs. C. and W., Solicitors and Notaries, I owe, albeit I will say no thanks to them, the opportunity of that hardly learned

good which dwells for those who can wrest it in a hateful taskwork, that faculty of 'detachment' which Marcus Aurelius learnt so long ago, by means of which the soul may withdraw into an inaccessible garden, and sing while the head bends above a ledger; or, in other words, the faculty of dreaming with one side of the brain, while calculating with the other. Mrs. Browning's great *Aurora Leigh* helped me more to the attainment of that than any book I know.

"In their office, too, among many other great things, I learnt that a man may be a good fellow and hate poetry—possibility undreamed of by sentimental youth; also that Messrs. Bass and Cope are not unworthy of their great reputation; and I had various nonsense knocked out of me, though they never succeeded in persuading me in that little matter of the 'ambrosial curls.'

"Through Samuel Dale I first came to understand how 'whatever is' *can* be 'best,' and also won a faith in God which I rather caught by infection than gained by any pro-

cess of his reasoning. Of all else I owe to Samuel how write? He knows.

"To a certain friend, mentioned last because he is not least, I owe: the sum of ten pounds, and a loving companionship, up hill and down dale, for which again I have no words and no—sovereigns."

When I first read through these, I was somewhat surprised at the omission of all reference to books which I know marked most striking periods in Narcissus' spiritual life: *Sartor Resartus*, Thoreau's *Walden*, for example, Mr. Pater's *Marius the Epicurean* and Browning's *Dramatis Personæ*. As I reflected, however, I came to the conclusion that such omission was but justice to his own individuality, for none of these books had created an *initiative* in Narcissus' thought, but rather come, as, after all, I suppose they come to most of us, as great confirming expressions of states of mind at which he had already arrived, though, as it were, but by moonlight. In them was the sunrise bringing all into clear sight and sure knowledge.

It would seem, indeed, that the growth of the soul in the higher spirits of our race is analogous to the growth of a child in the womb, in this respect: that in each case the whole gamut of earlier types is run through, before the ultimate form is attained in which it is decreed that the particular vital energy shall culminate. And, as in the physical world the various "halts," so to say, of the progress are illustrated by the co-existence and continual succession of those earlier types; so in the world of mind, at every point of spiritual evolution, a man may meet with an historical individuality who is a concrete embodiment of the particular state to which he has just attained. This, of course, was what Goethe meant when he referred to mysticism as being a frame of mind which one could experience all round and then leave behind. To quote Whitman, in another connection:—

> "We but level that lift
> To pass and continue beyond."

But an individuality must "crystallise out"

somewhere, and its final value will not so much depend on the number of states it has passed through, as how it has lived each on the way, with what depth of conviction and force of sincerity. For a modern young man to thus experience all round, and pass, and continue beyond where such great ones as St. Bernard, Pascal, and Swedenborg, have anchored their starry souls to shine thence upon men for all time, is no uncommon thing. It is more the rule than the exception: but one would hardly say that in going further they have gone higher, or ended greater. The footpath of pioneer individualism must inevitably become the highway of the race. Every American is not a Columbus.

There are two ways in which we may live our spiritual progress: as critics, or poets. Most men live theirs in that critical attitude which refuses to commit itself, which tastes all, but enjoys none; but the greatest in that earnest, final, rooted, creative, fashion which is the way of the poets. The one is

as a man who spends his days passing from place to place in search of a dwelling to his mind, but dies at last in an inn, having known nought of the settled peace of a home; but the other, howsoever often he has to change his quarters, for howsoever short a time he may remain in any one of his resting-places, makes of each a home, with roots that shoot in a night to the foundations of the world, and blossomed branches that mingle with the stars.

Criticism is a good thing, but poetry is a better. Indeed, criticism properly *is* not; it is but a process to an end. We could really do without it much better than we imagine: for, after all, the question is not so much *how* we live, but *do* we live? Who would not a hundred times rather be a fruitful Parsee than a barren *philosophe*? Yes, all lies, of course, in original greatness of soul; and there is really no state of mind which is not like Hamlet's pipe—if we but know the "touch of it," "it will discourse most eloquent music."

Now, it was that great sincerity in Narcissus that has always made us take him so seriously. And here I would remark in parenthesis, that trivial surface insincerities, such as we have had glimpses of in his dealings, do not affect such a great organic sincerity as I am speaking of. They are excrescences, which the great central health will sooner or later clear away. It was because he never held an opinion to which he was not, when called upon, practically faithful; never dreamed a dream without at once setting about its translation into daylight; never professed a creed for a week without some essay after the realisation of its new ideal; it was because he had the power and the courage to glow mightily, and to some purpose; because his life had a fiery centre, which his eyes were not afraid of revealing—that I speak of his great sincerity, a great capacity for intense life. Shallow patterers of divine creeds were, therefore, most abhorrent to him. "You must excuse me, sir," I remember his once saying to such a one, "but what are you do-

ing with cigarette and salutaris? If I held such a belief as yours, I would stand sandalled, with a rope round my waist, before to-morrow."

One quaint instance of this earnest attitude in all things occurs to me out of his school-days. He was a Divine Right man, a fiery Jacobite, in those days; and, probably not without some absurd unconfessed dream in his heart that it might somehow help the dead old cause, he one ofternoon fluttered the Hanoverian hearts—all the men we meet in street and mart are Hanoverians, of course—of our little literary club by solemnly rising "to give notice" that at the following meeting he would read a paper to prove that "the House of Hanover has no right to the English throne." Great was the excitement through the fortnight intervening, extending even to the masters; and the meeting was a full one, and no little stormy.

Narcissus rose with the air of a condemned Strafford, and with all his boyish armoury of eloquence and scorn fought over again

the long-lost battle, hiss and groan falling unheeded into the stream of his young voice. But vain, vain! hard is the Hanoverian heart in boy, as in man, and all your glowing periods were in vain—vain as, your peroration told us, "was the blood of gallant hearts shed on Culloden's field." Poor N., you had but one timorous supporter, even I, so early your *fidus Achates*—but one against so many. Yet were you crestfallen? Galileo with his "E pur si muove," Disraeli with his "The time will come," wore such a mien as yours, as we turned from that well-foughten field. Yes! and you loved to take in earnest vague Hanoverian threats of possible arrest for your baby-treason, and, for some time, I know, you never passed a policeman without a dignified tremor, as of one who might at any moment find a lodging in the Tower.

But the most serious of all N.'s "mad" enthusiasms was that of which the Reader has already received some hint, in the few paragraphs of his own confession above, that which "had almost sent him to the Himalayas."

It belongs to natures like his always through life to cherish a half belief in their old fairy tales, and a longing, however late in the day, to prove them true at last. To many such the revelations with which Madame Blavatsky, as with some mystic trumpet, startled the Western world some years ago, must have come with most passionate appeal ; and to Narcissus they came like a love arisen from the dead. Long before, he had " supped full " of all the necromantic excitements that poet or romancer could give. Guy Mannering had introduced him to Lilly ; Lytton and Hawthorne had sent him searching in many a musty folio for Elixir Vitæ and the Stone. Like Scythrop, in *Nightmare Abbey*, he had for a long period slept with horrid mysteries beneath his pillow. But suddenly his interest had faded : these phantoms fled before a rationalistic cock-crow, and Eugenius Philalethes and Robert Fludd went with Mejnour and Zanoni into a twilight forgetfulness. There was no hand to show the hidden way

to the land that might be, and there were hands beckoning and voices calling him along the highway to the land that is. So, dream-light passing, he must, perforce, reconcile himself to daylight, with its dusty beam and its narrow horizons.

Judge, then, with what a leaping heart he chanced on some newspaper gossip concerning the sybil, for it was so that he first stumbled across her mission. Ironical, indeed, that the so impossible "key" to the mystery should come by the hand of "our own correspondent"; but so it was, and that paragraph sold no small quantity of "occult" literature for the next twelve months. Mr. Sinnett, doorkeeper in the house of Blavatsky, who, as a precaution against the vision of Bluebeards that the word Oriental is apt to conjure up in Western minds, is always dressed in the latest mode, and, so to say, offers his cigar-case along with some horrid mystery—it was to his prospectus of the new gospel, his really delightful pages, that Narcissus first applied. Then he entered

within the gloomier Egyptian portals of the *Isis* itself, and from thence—well, in brief, he went in for a course of Redway, and little that figured in that gentleman's thrilling announcements was long in reaching his hands.

At last a day came when his eye fell upon a notice, couched in suitably mysterious terms, to the effect that really earnest seekers after divine truth might, after necessary probation, etc., join a brotherhood of such—which, it was darkly hinted, could give more than it dared promise. Up to this point Narcissus had been indecisive. He was, remember, quite in earnest, and to actually accept this new evangel meant to him—well, as he said, nothing less in the end than the Himalayas. Pending his decision, however, he had gradually developed a certain austerity, and experimented in vegetarianism ; and though he was, oddly enough, free of amorous bond that might have held him to earth, yet he had grown to love it rather rootedly since the earlier days when he was a " seeker." Moreover, though he read

much of "The Path," no actual Mejnour had yet been revealed to set his feet therein. But with this paragraph all indecision soon came to an end. He felt there a clear call, to neglect which would be to have seen the light and not to have followed it, ever for him the most tragic error to be made in life. His natural predisposition towards it was too great for him to do other than trust this new revelation; and now he must gird himself for "the sacrifice which truth always demands."

But, sacrifice! of what and for what? An undefined social warmth he was beginning to feel in the world, some meretricious ambition, and a great friendship—to which in the long run would he not be all the truer by the great new power he was to win? If hand might no longer spring to hand, and friendship vie in little daily acts of brotherhood, might he not, afar on his mountain-top, keep loving watch with clearer eyes upon the dear life he had left behind, and be its vigilant fate? Surely! and there was nothing worth in life that would not gain by such a devotion. All

life's good was of the spirit, and to give that a clearer shining, even in one soul, must help the rest. For if its light, shining, as now, through the grimy horn-lantern of the body, in narrow lanes and along the miasmatic flats of the world, even so helped men, how much more must it, rising above that earthly fume, in a hidden corner no longer, but in the open heaven, a star above the city. Sacrifice! yes, it was just such a tug as a man in the dark warmth of morning sleep feels it to leave the pillow. The mountain-tops of morning gleam cold and bare: but O! when, staff in hand, he is out amid the dew, the larks rising like fountains above him, the gorse bright as a golden fleece on the hill-side, and all the world a shining singing vision, what thought of the lost warmth then? What warmth were not well lost for this keen exhilarated sense in every nerve, in limb, in eye, in brain? What potion has sleep like this crystalline air it almost takes one's breath to drink, of such a maddening chastity is its grot-cool sparkle? What in-

toxication can she give us for this larger better rapture? So did Narcissus, an old Son of the Morning, figure to himself the struggle, and pronounce "the world well lost."

But I feel as I write how little I can give the Reader of all the "splendid purpose in his eyes" as he made this resolve. Perhaps I am the less able to do so as—let me confess—I also shared his dream. One could hardly come near him without, in some measure, doing that at all times; though with me it could only be a dream, for I was not free. I had Scriptural example to plead "Therefore I cannot come," though in any case I fear I should have held back, for I had no such creative instinct for realisation as Narcissus, and have, I fear, dreamed many a dream I had not the courage even to think of clothing in flesh and blood; like, may I say, the many who are poets for all save song—poets in chrysalis, all those who dream of what some do, and make the audience of those great articulate ones. But there were one or two

trifling doubts to set at rest before final decision. The Reader has greatly misconceived Narcissus if he has deemed him one of those simple souls whom any quack can gull, and the good faith of this mysterious fraternity was a difficult point to settle. A tentative application through the address given, an appropriate *nom de mystère*, had introduced the ugly detail of preliminary expenses. Divine truth has to pay its postage, its rent, its taxes, and so on; and the "guru" feeds not on air—although, of course, being a "guru," he comes as near it as the flesh will allow: therefore, and surely, Reader, a guinea per annum is, after all, reasonable enough. Suspect as much as one will, but how gainsay? Also, before the applicant could be admitted to novitiate even, his horoscope must be cast, and—well, the poor astrologer also needed bread and—no! not butter—five shillings for all his calculations, circles, and significations—well, that again was only reasonable. H'm, ye-e-s, but it was dubious; and, mad as we were, I don't think we ever

got outside that dubiety, but made up our minds, like other converts, to gulp the primary postulate, and pay the twenty-six shillings. From the first, however, Narcissus had never actually entrusted all his spiritual venture in this particular craft: he saw the truth independent of them, not they alone held her for him, though she might hold them, and they might be that one of the many avenues for which he had waited to lead him nearer to her heart. That was all. His belief in the new illumination neither stood nor fell with them, though his ardour for it culminated in the experience. One must take the most doubtful experiment seriously if we are in earnest for results.

So next came the sacred name of "the Order," which, Reader, I cannot tell thee, as I have never known it, Narcissus being bound by horrid oaths to whisper it to no man, and to burn at midnight the paper which gave it to his eyes. From this time, also, we could exchange no deep confidences of the kind at all, for the various MSS. by means of

which he was to begin his excursions into Urania, and which his "guru" sent from time to time—at first, it must be admitted, with a diligent frequency—were secret too. So several months went by, and my knowledge of his "chela-ship" was confined to what I could notice, and such trifling harmless gossip as "Heard from 'guru' this morning," "Copying an old MS. last night," and so on. What I could notice was truly, as Lamb would say, "great mastery," for lo! Narcissus, whose eyes had never missed a maiden since he could walk, and lay in wait to wrest his tribute of glance and blush from every one that passed, lo! he had changed all that, and Saint Anthony in an old master looks not more resolutely "the other way" than he, his very thoughts crushing his flesh with invisible pincers. No more softly-scented missives lie upon his desk a-mornings; and, instead of blowing out the candle to dream of Daffodilia, he opens his eyes in the dark to defy—the Dweller on the Threshold, if haply he should indeed already confront him.

One thrilling piece of news in regard to the latter he was unable to conceal. He read it out to me one flushed morning:

"*I—have—seen—him—and—am—his—master*,"

wrote the "guru," in answer to his neophyte's half fearful question. Fitly underlined and sufficiently spaced, it was a statement calculated to awe, if only by its mendacity. I wonder if that chapter of Bulwer's would impress one now as it used to do then. It were better, perhaps, not to try.

The next news of these mysteries was the conclusion of them. When so darkly esoteric a body begins to issue an extremely catchpenny "organ," with advertisements of theosophic "developers," magic mirrors, and mesmeric discs, and also advertises large copies of the dread symbol of the Order, "suitable for framing," at five shillings plain and seven and sixpence coloured, it is, of course, impossible to take it seriously, except in view of a police-court process, and one is evidently in the hands of very poor bunglers indeed. Such was the new departure in

propaganda instituted by a little magazine, mean in appearance, as the mouthpieces of all despised "isms" seem to be, with the first number of which, need one say, ended Narcissus' ascent of "The Path." I don't think he was deeply sad at being disillusionised. Unconsciously a broader philosophy had slowly been undermining his position, and all was ready for the fall. It cost no such struggle to return to the world as it had taken to leave it, for the poet had overgrown the philosopher, and the open mystery of the common day was already exercising an appeal beyond that of any melodramatic "arcana." Of course the period left its mark upon him, but it is most conspicuous upon his bookshelves.

CHAPTER VII.

The Children of Apollo.

"HE is a *true* poet," or "He is a *genuine* artist," are phrases which irritate one day after day in modern criticism. One had thought that "poet" and "artist" were enough; but there must be a need, we regretfully suppose, for these re-enforcing qualifications; and there can be but the one, that the false in each kind do so exceedingly abound, that none can be taken as genuine without such special certificate. The widespread confusion with the poet of the rhetorician and sentimentalist in verse, and again of the mere rhymer without even rhetoric, not to refer to finer differentiation of error, is also a fruitful source of bewilderment. The misuse of the word has parallels: for instance, the spurious generic use

of the word " man " for " male," the substitution of " artist " for " painter." But here we have only to deal with that one particular abuse. Some rules how to know a poet may conceivably be of interest, though of no greater value.

Of course, the one first and last test is his work, but " how to know poetry " is another matter, which I do not propose treating of here; my intention rather being to dot down a few personal characteristics—not so much his " works " as his " ways." I write as they come into my head; and to any Reader about to cry out against digression, let me add: I write thinking of Narcissus; for know all men, friend or Philistine, if you have yet to learn it, my Narcissus is a poet!

First, as to the great question of " garmenting." The superstition that the hat and the cloak " does it " has gone out in mockery, but only that the other superstition might reign in its stead—that the hat and cloak cannot do it. Because one great poet dispensed with " pontificals," and yet

brought the fire from heaven, henceforward "pontificals" are humbug, and the wearer thereof but charlatan, despite—"the master yonder in the isle." Pegasus must pack in favour of a British hunter, and even the poet at last wear the smug regimentals of mediocrity and mammon. Ye younger choir especially have a care, for, though you sing with the tongues of men and angels, and wear not a silk hat, it shall avail you nothing. Neither Time, which is Mudie, nor Eternity, which is Fame, will know you, and your verses remain till doom in an ironical *editio princeps*, which not even the foolish bookman shall rescue from the threepenny box. It is very unlikely that you will escape as did Narcissus, for though, indeed,

> "He swept a fine majestic sweep
> Of toga Tennysonian,
> Wore strange soft hat, that such as you
> Would tremble to be known in,"

nevertheless, he somehow won happier fates, on which, perhaps, it would be unbecoming in so close a friend to dilate.

The "true" poet is, first of all, a gentleman, usually modest, never arrogant, and only assertive when pushed. He does not by instinct take himself seriously, as the "poet-ape" doth, though if he meets with recognition it becomes, of course, his duty to acknowledge his faculty, and make good Scriptural use of it.

He is probably least confident, however, when praised; and never, except in rare moments, especially of eclipse, has he a strong faith in the truth that is in him. Therefore crush him, saith the Philistine, as we crush the vine; strike him, as one strikes the lyre. When young, he imagines the world to be filled with one ambition; later on, he finds that so indeed it is—but the name thereof is not Poesy. Strange! sighs he. And if, when he is seventeen, he writes a fluent song, and his fellow-clerk admire it, why, it is nothing; surely the ledger-man hath such scraps in his poke, or at least can roll off better. "True bards believe all able to achieve what they achieve," said

Naddo. But lo! that ambition is a word that begins with pounds and ends with pence—like life, quoth the ledger-man, who, after all, had but card-scores, a tailor's account, and the bill for his wife's confinement in his pocket.

All through his life he loves his last-written most, and no honey of Hybla is so sweet as a new rhyme. Let no maid hope to rival it with her lips—she but interrupts: for the travail of a poet is even as that of his wife —after the pain comes that dear joy of a new thing born into the world, which doting sipping dream beware to break. Fifty repetitions of the new sweetness, fifty deliberate rollings of it under the tongue, is, I understand, the minimum duration of such, before the passion is worked off, and the dream-child really breathing free of its dream-parent. I have occasionally come upon Narcissus about the twenty-fifth, I suppose, and wondered at my glum reception. "Poetry gone sour," he once gave as the reason. Try it not, Reader, if, indeed, in thy colony of beavers a poet really dwells.

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He is a born palæontologist: that is, he can build up an epic from a hint. And, despite modern instances, the old rule obtains for him, he need not be learned—that is, not deeply or abundantly, only at points—superficially, the superficial would say. Well, yes, he has an eye for knowing what surfaces mean, the secret of the divining rod. Take it this way. We want an expression, say, of the work of Keats, want to be told wherein lies his individuality. You take Mr. Buxton Forman's four volumes, and "work at" Keats! and, after thirty nights and days, bring your essay. On the morning of the thirtieth the poet read again the *Grecian Urn*, and at eventide wrote a sonnet; and on the morning of the thirty-first, essay and sonnet are side by side. But, by the evening, your essay is in limbo—or in type, all's one—while the sonnet is singing in our heart, persistently haunting our brain. Some day the poet, too, writes an essay, and thus plainly shows, says the essayist, how little he really knew of the matter—he did n't actually

know of the so-and-so—and yet it was his ignorance that gave us that illuminating line, after all.

I doubt if one would be on safe ground in saying: Take, now, the subject of wine. We all know how abstemious is the poetical habit; and yet, to read these songs, one would think 't was Bacchus' self that wrote, or that Clarence who lay down to die in a butt of Malmsey. Though the inference is open to question,

> "I often wonder if old Omar drank
> One half the quantity he bragged in song."

Doubtless he sat longest and drank least of all the topers of Naishapur, and the bell for Saki rang not from his corner half often enough to please mine host. Certainly the longevity of some modern poets can only be accounted for by some such supposition in their case. The proposition is certainly proved inversely in the case of Narcissus, for he has not written one vinous line, and yet—well, and yet! Furthermore, it may interest

future biographers to know that in his cups he was wont to recite Hamlet's advice to the players, throned upon a tram-car.

The "true" poet makes his magic with the least possible ado; he and the untrue are as the angler who is born to the angler who is made at the tackle-shop. One encumbers the small of his back with nameless engines, talks much of creels, hath a rod like a weaver's beam; he travels first class to some distant show-lake among the hills, and he toils all day as the fishermen of old toiled all night; while Tom, his gardener's son, but a mile outside the town, with a willow wand and a bent pin, hath caught the family supper. So is it with him who is proverbially born not made. His friends say: "O, you should go to such-and-such falls; you 'd write poetry there, if you like. We all said so"; or, "What are you doing in here scribbling? Look through the window at the moonlight; there 's poetry for you. Go out into that if you want sonnets." Of course, he never takes his friends' advice; he has long known

that they know nothing whatever about it. He is probably quite ignorant of metrical law, but one precept instinct taught him from the beginning, and he finds it expressed one day in Wordsworth (with a blessed comfort of assurance—like in this little, O, may be like, somehow, in the great thing too!): "Poetry is emotion remembered in tranquillity." The wandlike moments, he remembers, always came to him in haunts all remote indeed from poetry: a sudden touch at his heart, and the air grows rhythmical, and seems a-ripple with dreams; and, albeit, in whatever room of dust or must he be, the song will find him, will throw her arms about him, so it seems, will close his eyes with her sweet breath, that he may open them upon the hidden stars.

"Impromptus" are the quackery of the poetaster. One may take it for granted, as a general rule, that anything written "on the spot," is worthless. A certain young poet, who could when he liked do good things, printed some verses, which he declared in a

sub-title were "Written on the top of Snowdon in a thunderstorm." He asked an opinion, and one replied: "Written on the top of Snowdon in a thunderstorm." The poet was naturally angry—and yet, what need of further criticism?

The poet, when young, although as I said, he is not likely to fall into the foolishness of conceit which belongs to the poetaster, is yet too apt in his zeal of dedication to talk much of his "art," or, at least, think much; also to disparage life, and to pronounce much gratuitous absolution in the name of Poetry:

Did Burns drink and wench?—yet he sang!

Did Coleridge opiate and neglect his family?—yet he sang!!

Did Shelley—well, whatever Shelley did of callous and foolish, the list is long—yet he sang!!!

As years pass, however, he grows out of this stage, and, while regarding his art in a spirit of dedication equally serious, and how much saner, he comes to realise that, after

all, art but forms one integral part, however great, of a healthy life, and that for the greatest artist there are still duties in life more imperative than any art can lay upon him. It is a great hour when he rises up in his resolution first to be a man, in faith that, if he be such, the artist in him will look after itself—first a man, and surely all the greater artist for being that; though if not, still a man. That is the duty that lies "next" to all of us. Do that, and, as we are told, the other will be clearer for us. In that hour that earlier form of absolution will reverse itself on his lips into one of commination. Did they sing?—yet they sinned here and here; and as a man soweth, so shall he reap, singer or sot. Lo! his songs are stars in heaven, but his sins are snakes in hell: each shall bless and torment him in turn.

Pitiable, indeed, will seem to him in that hour the cowardice that dares to cloak its sinning with some fine-spun theory, that veils the gratification of its desires in some shrill evangel, and wrecks a woman's life in

the names of—Liberty and Song! Art wants no such followers: her bravest work is done by brave men, and not by sneaking opium-eaters and libidinous "reformers." We all have sinned, and we all will go on sinning, but for God's sake, let us be honest about it. There are worse things than honest sin. If, God help you, you have ruined a girl, do penance for it through your life; pay your share; but don't, whatever you do, hope to make up for a bad heart by a good brain. Foolish art-patterers may suffer the recompense to pass, for likely they have all the one and none of the other; but good men will care nothing about you or your work, so long as bad trees refuse to bring forth good fruit, or figs to grow on thistles.

We have more to learn from Florentine artists than any "craft mystery." If the capacity for using the blossom while missing the evil fruit, of which Mr. Pater speaks in the case of Aurelius, were only confined to those evil-bearing trees: alas! it is all blossom with us moderns, good or bad alike, and pu-

rity or putrescence are all one to us, so that they shine. I suppose few regard Giotto's circle as his greatest work: would that more did. The lust of the eye, with Gautier as high-priest, is too much with us.

The poet, too, who perhaps began with the simple ambition of becoming a "literary man," soon finds how radically incapable of ever being merely that he is. Alas! how soon the nimbus fades from the sacred name of "author." At one time he had been ready to fall down and kiss the garment's hem, say, of—of a "Canterbury" editor (this, of course, when very, very young), as of a being from another sphere; and a writer in *The Fortnightly* had swam into his ken, trailing visible clouds of glory. But by and by he finds himself breathing with perfect composure in that rarefied air, and in course of time the grey conviction settles upon him that these fabled people are in nowise different from the booksellers and business men he had found so sordid and dull—no more individual or delightful as a race; and he speedily comes to the old con-

clusion he had been at a loss to understand a year or two ago, that, as a rule, the people who do not write books are infinitely to be preferred to the people who do. When he finds exceptions, they occur as they used to do in shop and office—the charm is all independent of the calling; for just as surely as a man need not grow mean, and hard, and dried up, however prosperous be his iron-foundry, so sure is it that a man will not grow generous, rich-minded, loving, and all that is golden by merely writing of such virtues at so much a column. The inherent insincerity, more or less, of all literary work is a fact of which he had not thought. I am speaking of the mere "author," the writer-tradesman, the amateur's superstition; not of men of genius, who, despite cackle, cannot disappoint. If they seem to do so, it must be that we have not come close enough to know them. But the man of genius is rarer, perhaps, in the ranks of authorship than anywhere: you are far more likely to find him on the exchange. They are as scarce as

Caxtons: London possesses hardly half-a-dozen examples.

Narcissus enjoyed the delight of calling one of these his friend, "a certain aristocratic poet who loved all kinds of superiorities," again to borrow from Mr. Pater. He had once seen him afar off and worshipped, as it is the blessedness of boys to be able to worship; but never could he have dreamed in that day of the dear intimacy that was to come. "If he could but know me as I am," he had sighed; but that was all. With the almost childlike naturalness which is his greatest charm he confessed this sigh long after, and won that poet's heart. Well I remember his bursting into our London lodging late one afternoon, great-eyed and almost in tears for joy of that first visit. He had pre-eminently the capacity which most fine men have of falling in love with men—as one may be sure of a subtle greatness in a woman whose eye singles out a woman to follow on the stage at the theatre—and certainly, no other phrase can express that state of shining,

trembling exaltation, the passion of the friendships of Narcissus. And although he was rich in them—rich, that is, as one can be said to be rich in treasure so rare—saving one only, they have never proved that fairy-gold which such do often prove. Saving that one, golden fruit still hangs for every white cluster of wonderful blossom.

"I thought you must care for me if you could but know me aright," Narcissus had said.

"Care for you! Why, you beautiful boy! you seem to have dropped from the stars," the poet had replied in the caressing fashion of an elder brother.

He had frankly fallen in love, too: for Narcissus has told me that his great charm is a boyish naturalness of heart, that ingenuous gusto in living which is one of the sure witnesses to genius. This is all the more piquant because no one would suspect it, as, I suppose, few do; probably, indeed, a consensus would declare him the last man in London of whom that is true. No

one would seem to take more seriously the *beau monde* of modern paganism, with its hundred gospels of *La Nuance;* no one, assuredly, were more *blasé* than he, with his languors of pose, and face of so wan a flame. The Oscar Wilde of modern legend were not more as a dweller in Nirvana. But Narcissus maintained that all this was but a disguise which the conditions of his life compelled him to wear, and in wearing which he enjoyed much subtle subterranean merriment; while underneath the real man lived, fresh as morning, vigorous as a young sycamore, wild-hearted as an eagle, ever ready to flash out the "pass-word primeval" to such as alone could understand. How else had he at once taken the stranger lad to his heart with such a sunlight of welcome? As the maid every boy must have sighed for but so rarely found, who makes not as if his love were a weariness which she endured, and the kisses she suffered, cold as green buds, were charities, but frankly glows to his avowal with "I love you, too, dear Jack,"

and kisses him from the first with mouth like a June rose—so did that *blasé* poet cast away his conventional Fahrenheit, and call Narcissus friend in their first hour. Men of genius alone know that fine *abandon* of soul. In such is the poet confessed as unmistakably as in his verse, for the one law of his life is that he be an elemental, and the capacity for great simple impressions is the spring of his power. Let him beware of losing that.

I sometimes wonder as I come across the last frivolous gossip concerning that poet in the paragraphs of the new journalism, or meet his name in some distinguished bead-roll in *The Morning Post*, whether Narcissus was not, after all, mistaken about him, and whether he could still, season after season, go through the same stale round of reception, private view, first night, and all the various drill of fashion and folly, if that boy's heart were alive still. One must believe it once throbbed in him: we have his poems for that, and a poem cannot lie; but it is hard to think that it could still keep on its

young beating beneath such a choking pressure of convention, and in an air so "sunken from the healthy breath of morn." But, on the other hand, I have almost a superstitious reliance on Narcissus' intuition, a faculty in him which not I alone have marked, but which I know was the main secret of his appeal for woman. They, as the natural possessors of the power, feel a singular kinship with a man who also possesses it, a gift as rarely found among his sex as that delicacy which largely depends on it, and which is the other sure clue to a woman's love. She is so little used, poor flower, to be understood, and to meet with other regard than the gaze of satyrs.

However, be Narcissus' intuition at fault or not in the main, still it was very sure that the boy's heart in that man of the world did wake from its sleep for a while at the wand-like touch of his youth; and if, after all, as maybe, Narcissus was but a new sensation in his jaded round, at least he was a healthy one. Nor did the callous ingratitude of

impetuousness which follows so swiftly upon mere sensation over and another in the sorrows of my friend. For during the last week before he left us came a letter of love and cheer in that poet's wonderful handwriting —handwriting delicious with honeyed lines, each word a flower, each letter moulded with the firm soft curves of bowlders in bed, or the delicate knobs of palm against the sky.

CHAPTER VIII.

George Muncaster.

WHEN I spoke of London's men of genius I referred, of course, to such as are duly accredited, certificated, so to say, by public opinion; but of those others whose shining is under the bushel of obscurity, few or many, how can one affirm? That there are such, any man with any happy experience of living should be able to testify; and I should say, for fear of misunderstanding, that I do not use the word genius in any technical sense, not only of men who can *do* in the great triumphal way, but also of those who can *be* in their quiet, effective fashion, within their own "scanty plot of ground"; men who, if ever conscious of it, are content with the diffusion of their influence around the narrow limits of their daily

life, content to bend their creative instincts on the building and beautifying of home. It is no lax use of the word genius to apply it to such, for unless you profess the modern heresy that genius is but a multiplied talent, a coral-island growth, that earns its right to a new name only when it has lifted its head above the waters of oblivion, you must agree. For "you saw at once," said Narcissus, in reference to that poet, "that his writing was so delightful because he was more so." His writings, in fact, were but the accidental emanations of his personality. He might have given himself out to us in fugues, or canvasses, or simply, like the George Muncaster of whom I am thinking, in the sweet breath and happy shining of his home. Genius is a personal quality, and if a man has it, whatever his hand touches will bear the trace of his power, an undying odour, an unfading radiance. When Rossetti wrote "Beauty like hers is genius," he was not dealing in metaphor, and Meissonier should have abolished forever the superstition of large canvasses.

These desultory hints of the development of Narcissus would certainly be more incomplete than necessity demands, if I did not try to give the Reader some idea of the man of genius of this unobtrusive type to whom I have just alluded. Samuel Dale used to call himself "an artist in life," and there could be no truer general phrase to describe George Muncaster than that. His whole life possesses a singular unity, such as is the most satisfying joy of a fine work of art, considering which it never occurs to one to think of the limitation of conditions or material. So with his life, the shortness of man's "term" is never felt; one could win no completer effect with eternity than he with every day. Hurry and false starts seem unknown in his round, and his little home is a microcosm of the Golden Age.

It would even seem sometimes that he has an artistic rule over his "accidents," for "surprises" have a wonderful knack of falling into the general plan of his life, as though but waited for. Our first meeting with him

was a singular instance of this. I say "our," for Narcissus and I chanced to be walking a holiday together at the time. It fell on this wise. At Tewkesbury it was we had arrived, one dull September evening, just in time to escape a wetting from a grey drizzle then imminent; and in no very buoyant spirits we turned into *The Swan Inn.* A more dismal coffee-room for a dismal evening could hardly be—gloomy, vast, and thinly furnished. We entered sulkily, seeming the only occupants of the sepulchre. However, there was a small book on the table facing the door, sufficiently modern in appearance to catch one's eye and arouse a faint ripple of interest. "A Canterbury," we cried. "And a Whitman, more's the wonder," cried Narcissus, who had snatched it up. "Why, someone's had the sense, too, to cut out the abominable portrait. I wonder who it belongs to. The owner must evidently have some right feeling."

Then, before there was time for further exclamatory compliment of the unknown,

we were half-startled by the turning round of an arm-chair at the far end of the room, and were aware of a manly voice of exquisite quality asking, "Do you know Whitman?"

And moving towards the speaker, we were for the first time face to face with the strong and gentle George Muncaster, who since stands in our little gallery of types as Whitman's Camarado and Divine Husband made flesh. I wish, Reader, that I could make you see his face; but at best I have little faith in pen portraits. It is comparatively easy to write a graphic description of *a* face; but when it has been read, has the reader realised *the* face? I doubt it, and am inclined to believe that three different readers will carry away three different impressions even from a really brilliant portrait. Laborious realism may, at least, I think, be admitted as hopeless. The only chance is in a Meredithian lightning-flash, and those fly but from one or two bows. I wonder if an image will help at all here. Think on a pebbly stream, on a brisk, bright morning; dwell on the

soft, shining lines of its flowing; and then recall the tonic influence, the sensation of grip, which the pebbles give it. Dip your hand into it again in fancy; realise how chaste it is, and then again think how bright and good it is. And if you realise these impressions as they come to me, you will have gained some idea of George Muncaster's face —the essential spirit of it, I mean, ever so much more important than the mere features. Such, at least, seemed the meaning of his face even in the first moment of our intercourse that September dusk, and so it has never ceased to come upon us even until now.

And what a night that was! what a talk! How soon did we find each other out! Long before the maid knocked at the door, and hinted by the delicate insinuation of a supposed ring that there was "a budding morrow" in the air. But our passionate generosity of soul was running in too strong a tide just then to be stemmed by any such interference; it could but be diverted, and Muncaster's bedroom served us as well wherein to squat

in one of those close, rapt circles of talk such as, I think, after all, men who love poetry can alone know—men, anyhow, with *a* poetry.

Bed, that had for some time been calling us, unheeded as Juliet's nurse, had at last to be obeyed; but how grudgingly; and how eagerly we sprang from it at no late hour in the morning, at the first thought of the sweet new thing that had come into the world—like children who, half in a doze before waking, suddenly remember last night's new wonder of a toy, to awake in an instant, and scramble into clothes to look at it again. Thus, like children we rose; but it was shy as lovers we met at the breakfast-table, as lovers shy after last night's kissing. (You may not have loved a fellow-man in this way, Reader, but we are, any one of us, as good men as you; so keep your eyebrows down, I beseech you.)

One most winsome trait of our new friend was soon apparent—as, having, to our sorrow, to part at the inn door right and left, we talked of meeting again at one or the other's

home: a delicate disinclination to irreverently "make sure" of the new joy; a "listening fear," as though of a presiding good spirit that might revoke his gift if one stretched out towards it with too greedy hands. "Rather let us part and say nought. You know where a letter will find me. If our last night was a real thing, we shall meet again, never fear." With some such words as those it was that he bade us good-bye.

Of course, letters found all three of us before a fortnight had gone by, and in but a short time we found his home. There it is that George should be seen. Away he is full of precious light, but home is his setting. To Narcissus, who found it in that green period when all youngsters take vehement vows of celibacy, and talk much of "free love," all ignorant, one is in charity persuaded, of what they quite mean, that home was certainly as great and lasting a revelation as the first hour of "Poetry's divine first finger-touch." It was not that his own home-life had been unhappy, for it was the reverse,

and rich indeed in great and sweet influences; but it was rather, I think, that the ideal of a home is not so easily to be reached from that home in which one is a child, where one is too apt to miss the whole in consideration of one's own part in it, as from another on which we can look from the outside.

Our parents, even to the end, partake too much of the nature of mythology; it always needs an effort to imagine them beings with quite the same needs and dreams as ourselves. We rarely get a glimpse of their poetry, for the very reason that we ourselves are factors in it, and are, therefore, too apt to dwell on the less happy details of the domestic life, details which one ray of their poetry would transfigure as the sun transfigures the motes in his beam. Thus, in that green age I spoke of, one's sickly vision can but see the dusty, world-worn side of domesticity, the petty daily cares of living, the machinery, so to say, of "house and home." But when one stands in another home, where

these are necessarily unseen by us, stands with the young husband, the poetry-maker, how different it all seems. One sees the creation bloom upon it; one ceases to blaspheme, and learns to bless. Later, when at length one understands why it is sweeter to say "wife" than "sweetheart," how even one may be reconciled to calling one's Daffodilia "little mother"—because of the children, you know; it would never do for them to say Daffodilia—then he will understand too how those petty details, formerly so "*banal*," are, after all, but notes in the music, and what poetry can flicker, like its own blue flame, around even the joint purchase of a frying-pan.

That Narcissus ever understood this great old poetry he owes to George Muncaster. In the very silence of his home one hears a singing—"There lies the happiest land." It was one of his own quaint touches that the first night we found his nest, after the maid had given us admission, there should be no one to welcome us into the bright little par-

lour but a wee boy of four, standing in the doorway like a robin that has hopped on to one's window-sill. But with what a dear grace did the little chap hold out his hand and bid us good evening, and turn his little morsel of a bird's tongue round our names; to be backed at once by a ring of laughter from the hidden "prompter" thereupon revealed. O happy, happy home! may God for ever smile upon you! There should be a special grace for happy homes. George's set us "collecting" such, with results undreamed of by youthful cynic. Take courage, Reader, if haply you stand with hesitating toe above the fatal plunge. Fear not, you can swim if you will. Of course, you must take care that your joint poetry-maker be such a one as George's. One must not seem to forget the loving wife who made such dreaming as his possible. He did not; and, indeed, had you told him of his happiness, he would but have turned to her with a smile that said, "All of thee, my love"; while, did one ask of this and that, how

quickly "Yes! that was George's idea," laughed along her lips.

While we sat talking that first evening, there suddenly came three cries, as of three little heads straining out of a nest, for "Father"; and obedient, with a laugh, he left us. This, we soon learnt, was a part of the sweet evening ritual of home. After mother's more practical service had been rendered the little ones, and they were cosily "tucked in," then came "father's turn," which consisted of his sitting by their bedside—Owen and Geoffrey on one hand, and little queen Phyllis, maidenlike in solitary cot, on the other—and crooning to them a little evening song. In the dark, too, I should say, for it was one of his wise provisions that they should be saved from ever fearing that; and that, whenever they awoke to find it round them in the middle of the night, it should bring them no other association but "father's voice."

A quaint recitative of his own, which he generally contrived to vary each night, was

the song, a loving croon of sleep and rest. The brotherhood of rest, one might name his theme for grown-up folk; as in the morning, we afterwards learnt, he is wont to sing them another little song of the brotherhood of work; the aim of his whole beautiful effort for them being to fill their hearts with a sense of the brotherhood of all living things —flowers, butterflies, bees and birds, the milk-boy, the policeman, the man at the crossing, the grocer's pony, all within the circle of their little lives, as living and working in one great *camaraderie*. Sometimes he would extemporise a little rhyme for them, filling it out with his clear, happy voice, and that tender pantomime that comes so naturally to a man who not merely loves children —for who is there that does not?—but one born with the instinct for intercourse with them. To those not so born it is as difficult to enter into the life and prattle of birds. I have once or twice crept outside the bedroom door when neither children nor George thought of eavesdroppers, and the following

little songs are impressions from memory of his. You must imagine them chanted by a voice full of the infinite tenderness of fatherhood, and even then you will but dimly realise the music they have as he sings them. I run the risk of his forgiving my printing them here:

MORNING SONG.

Morning comes to little eyes,
Wakens birds and butterflies,
Bids the flower uplift his head,
Calls the whole round world from bed.
Up jump Geoffrey!
Up jump Owen!!
Then up jump Phyllis!!!
And father's going!

EVENING SONG.

The sun is weary, for he ran
So far and fast to-day;
The birds are weary, for who sang
So many songs as they?
The bees and butterflies at last
Are tired out; for just think, too,
How many gardens through the day
Their little wings have fluttered through.

And so, as all tired people do,
They've gone to lay their sleepy heads
Deep, deep in warm and happy beds.
The sun has shut his golden eye,

And gone to sleep beneath the sky;
The birds, and butterflies, and bees
Have all crept into flowers and trees,
And all lie quiet, still as mice,
Till morning comes, like father's voice.
So Phyllis, Owen, Geoffrey, you
Must sleep away till morning too;
Close little eyes, lie down little heads,
And sleep, sleep, sleep in happy beds.

As the Reader has not been afflicted with a great deal of verse in these pages, I shall also venture to copy here another little song which, as his brains have grown older, George has been fond of singing to them at bedtime, and with which the Reader is not like to have enjoyed a previous acquaintance:

REST.[1]

When the Sun and the Golden Day
Hand in hand are gone away,
At your door shall Sleep and Night
Come and knock in the fair twilight,
Let them in, twin travellers blest;
Each shall be an honoured guest,
And give you rest.

[1] From a tiny privately-printed volume of deliciously original lyrics by Mr. R. K. Leather, since republished by Mr. Fisher Unwin, 1890, and at present published by Mr. John Lane.

They shall tell of the stars and moon,
And their lips shall move to a glad sweet tune,
Till upon your cool, white bed
Fall at last your nodding head ;
 Then in dreamland fair and blest,
 Farther off than East and West,
 They give you rest.

Night and Sleep, that goodly twain,
Tho' they go, shall come again ;
When your work and play are done,
And the Sun and Day are gone
 Hand in hand thro' the scarlet West,
 Each shall come, an honoured guest,
 And bring you rest.

Watching at your window-sill,
If upon the Eastern hill
Sun and Day come back no more,
They shall lead you from the door
 To their kingdom calm and blest,
 Farther off than East or West,
 And give you rest.

Arriving down to breakfast earlier than expected next morning, we discovered George busy at some more of his loving ingenuity. He half blushed in his shy way, but went on writing in this wise, with chalk, upon a small blackboard : " *Thursday—Thor's-day—Jack the Giant Killer's day.*" Then, in one corner of the board, a sun was rising with a merry

face and flaming locks, and beneath him was written "*Phœbus-Apollo*"; while in the other corner was a setting moon, "*Lady Cynthia.*" There were other quaint matters, too, though they have escaped my memory; but these hints are sufficient to indicate George's morning occupation. Thus he endeavoured to implant in the young minds he felt so sacred a trust an ever-present impression of the full significance of life in every one of its details. The days of the week should mean for them what they did mean, should come with a veritable personality, such as the sun and the moon gained for them by thus having actual names, like friends and playfellows. This Thor's-day was an especially great day for them; for, in the evening, when George had returned from business, and there was yet an hour to bedtime, they would come round him to hear one of the adventures of the great Thor—adventures which he had already contrived, he laughingly told us, to go on spinning out of the Edda through no less than the Thursdays

of two years. Certainly his ingenuity of economy with his materials was no little marvel, and he confessed to often being at his wit's end. For Thursday night was not alone starred with stories; every night there was one to tell; sometimes an incident of his day in town, which he would dress up with the imaginative instinct of a born teller of fairy-tales. He had a knack, too, of spreading one story over several days which would be invaluable to a serial writer. I remember one simple instance of his device.

He sat in one of those great cane nursing chairs, Phyllis on one knee, Owen on the other, and Geoffrey perched in the hollow space in the back of the chair, leaning over his shoulder, all as solemn as a court awaiting judgment. George begins with a preliminary glance behind at Geoffrey: "Happy there, my boy? That 's right. Well, there was once a beautiful garden."

"Yes-s-s-s," go the three solemn young heads.

"And it was full of the most wonderful things."

"Yes-s-s-s."

"Great trees, so green, for the birds to hide and sing in; and flowers so fair and sweet that the bees said that, in all their flying hither and thither, they had never yet found any so full of honey in all the world. And the birds, too, what songs they knew; and the butterflies, were there ever any so bright and many-coloured?" etc., etc.

"But the most wonderful thing about the garden was that everything in it had a wonderful story to tell."

"Yes-s-s-s."

"The birds, and bees, and butterflies, even the trees and flowers, each knew a wonderful fairy-tale."

"Oh-h-h-h."

"But of all in the garden the grasshopper knew the most. He had been a great traveller, for he had such long legs."

Again a still deeper murmur of breathless interest.

"Now, would you like to hear what the grasshopper had to tell?"

"Oh, yes-s-s-s."

"Well; you shall—to-morrow night!"

So off his knees they went, as he rose with a merry, loving laugh, and kissed away the long sighs of disappointment, and sent them to bed, agog for all the morrow's night should reveal.

Need one say that the children were not the only disappointed listeners? Besides, they have long since known all the wonderful tale, whereas one of the poorer grown-up still wonders wistfully what that grasshopper who was so great a traveller, and had such long legs, had to tell.

But I had better cease. Were I sure that the Reader was seeing what I am seeing, hearing as I, I should not fear; but how can I be sure of that? Had I the pen which that same George will persist in keeping for his letters, I should venture to delight the Reader with more of his story. One underhand hope of mine, however, for these poor

hints is, that they may by their very imperfection arouse him to give the world "the true story" of a happy home. Narcissus repeatedly threatened that, if he did not take pen in hand, he would some day "make copy" of him; and now I have done it instead. Moreover, I shall further presume on his forbearance by concluding with a quotation from one of his letters that came to me but a few months back:

"You know how deeply exercised the little ones are on the subject of death, and how I had answered their curiosity by the story that after death all things turn into flowers. Well, what should startle the wife's ears the other day but 'Mother, I wish you would die.' 'O why, my dear?' 'Because I should so like to water you!' was the delicious explanation. The theory has, moreover, been called to stand at the bar of experience, for a week or two ago one of Phyllis' goldfish died. There were tears at first, of course, but they suddenly dried up as Geoffrey, in his reflective way, wondered 'what flower it

would come to.' Here was a dilemma. One had never thought of such contingencies. But, of course, it was soon solved. 'What flower would you like it to be, my boy?' I asked. 'A poppy!' he answered; and after consultation, 'a poppy!' agreed the others. So a poppy it is to be. A visit to the seedsman's procured the necessary surreptitious poppy seed; and so now poor Sir Goldfish sleeps with the seed of sleep in his mouth, and the children watch his grave day by day, breathless for his resplendent resurrection. Will you write us an epitaph?"

Ariel forgive me! Here is what I sent;

"Five inches deep Sir Goldfish lies;
Here last September was he laid;
Poppies these, that were his eyes,
Of fish-bones are these blue-bells made;
His fins of gold that to and fro
Waved and waved so long ago,
Still as petals wave and wave
To and fro above his grave.
Hearken, too! for so his knell
Tolls all day each tiny bell."

CHAPTER IX.

That Thirteenth Maid.

"Who chooseth me must give and hazard all he hath."
Merchant of Venice.

IT occurs to me here to wonder whether there can be any reader ungrateful enough to ask with grumbling voice, "What of the book-bills? The head-line has been the sole mention of them now for many pages; and in the last chapter, where a book was referred to, the writer was perverse enough to choose one that never belonged to Narcissus at all." To which I would venture to make humble rejoinder—Well, Goodman Reader, and what did you expect? Was it accounts, with all their thrilling details, with totals, "less discount," and fac-similes of the receipt stamps? Take another look at our first chapter. I promised nothing of

the sort there, I am sure. I promised simply to attempt for you the delineation of a personality which has had for all who came into contact with it enduring charm, in hope that, though at second-hand, you might have some pleasure of it also; and I proposed to do this mainly from the hints of documents which really are more significant than any letters or other writings could be, for the reason that they are of necessity so unconscious. I certainly had no intention of burdening you with the original data, any more than, should you accept the offer I made, also in that chapter, and entrust me with your private ledger for biographical purposes, I would think of printing it *in extenso*, and calling it a biography; though I should feel justified, after the varied story had been deduced and written out, in calling the product, metaphorical wise, "The private ledger of Johannes Browne, Esquire"—a title which, by the way, is copyright and duly "entered." Such was my attempt, and I maintain that I have so far kept my word.

Because whole shelves have been disposed of in a line, and a ninepenny "Canterbury" has rustled out into pages, you have no right to complain, for that is but the fashion of life, I have endeavoured to show. And let me say in passing that that said copy of Mr. Rhys' Whitman, though it could not manifestly appear in his book-bills, does at the present moment rest upon his shelf—"a moment's monument."

Perhaps it would be well, before proceeding with this present "place in the story," to set out with a statement of the various "authorities" for it; as all this being veritable history, perhaps one should. But then, Reader, here again I should have to catalogue quite a small library. However, I will enumerate a few of the more significant ones.

"Swinburne's *Tristram of Lyonesse*, 9/-, less dis., 6/9."

All that this great poem of "springtide passion with its fire and flowers" meant to Narcissus and his "Thirteenth Maid" in the morning of their love, those that have loved

too will hardly need telling, while those who have not could never understand, though I spake with the tongue of the poet himself. In this particular copy, which, I need hardly say, does not rest upon N.'s shelves, but on another in a sweet little bedchamber, there is a tender inscription and a sonnet which aimed at acknowledging how the hearts of those young lovers had gone out to that poet "with mouth of gold and morning in his eyes." The latter I have begged leave to copy here:

"Dear Heart, what thing may symbolise for us
A love like ours; what gift, whate'er it be,
Hold more significance 'twixt thee and me
Than paltry words a truth miraculous,
Or the poor signs that in astronomy
Tell giant splendours in their gleaming might?
Yet love would still give such, as in delight
To mock their impotence—so this for thee.

"This book for thee; our sweetest honeycomb
Of lovesome thought and passion-hearted rhyme,
Builded of gold, and kisses, and desire,
By that wild poet who so many a time
Our hungering lips have blessed, until a fire
Burnt speech up, and the wordless hour had come."

"Meredith's *Richard Feverel*, 6/-, less dis., 4/6."

Narcissus was never weary of reading those two wonderful chapters where Lucy and Richard meet, and he used to say that some day he would beg leave from Mr. Meredith to reprint at his own charges just those two chapters, to distribute to all true lovers in the kingdom. It would be hard to say how often he and his maid had read them aloud together, with amorous punctuation—caresses for commas, and kisses for full-stops.

"Morris' *Sigurd the Volsung*, 12/-, less dis., 9/-."

This book they loved when their love had grown to have more of earnest purpose in it, and its first hysteric ecstacy had passed into the more solemn ardours of the love that goes not with spring, but loves even unto the winter and beyond. It is marked all through in pencil by Narcissus; but on one page, where it opens easily, there are written initials, in a woman's hand, against this great passage:

"She said: 'Thou shalt never unsay it, and thy heart is mine indeed:
Thou shalt bear thy love in thy bosom as thou helpest the earth-folk's need:
Thou shalt wake to it dawning by dawning; thou shalt sleep and it shall not be strange:
There is none shall thrust between us till our earthly lives shall change.
Ah, my love shall fare as a banner in the hand of thy renown,
In the arms of thy fame accomplished shall it lie when we lay us adown.
O deathless fame of Sigurd! O glory of my lord!
O birth of the happy Brynhild to the measureless reward!'
So they sat as the day grew dimmer, and they looked on days to come,
And the fair tale speeding onward, and the glories of their home;
And they saw their crownèd children and the kindred of the kings,
And deeds in the world arising and the day of better things:
All the earthly exaltation, till their pomp of life should be passed,
And soft on the bosom of God their love should be laid at the last."

And on the page facing this lies a pressed flower—there used to be two—guarded by these tender rhymes:

"Whoe'er shall read this mighty song
In some forthcoming evensong,
We pray thee guard these simple flowers,
For, gentle Reader, they are 'ours.'"

But ill has some "gentle Reader" attended to the behest, for, as I said, but one of the flowers remains. One is lost—and Narcissus has gone away. This inscription is but one of many scattered here and there through his books, for he had a great facility in such romin graces, as he had a neat hand at tying a bow. I don't think he ever sent a box of flowers without his fertility serving him with some rose-leaf fancy to accompany them; and on birthdays and all red-letter days he was always to be counted upon for an appropriate rhyme. If his art served no other purpose, his friend would be grateful to him for that alone, for many great days would have gone without their "white stone" but for him; when, for instance, J. A. W. took that brave plunge of his, which has since so abundantly justified him and more than fulfilled prophecy; or when Samuel Dale took that bolder, namely a wife, he being a philosopher—incidents, Reader, on which I long so to digress, and for which, if you could only know beforehand, you would, I

am sure, give me freest hand. But beautiful stories both, I may not tell of you here; though if the Reader and I ever spend together those hinted nights at the "Mermaid," I then may.

But to return. I said above that if I were to enumerate all the books, so to say, "implicated" in the love of Narcissus and his Thirteenth Maid, I should have to catalogue quite a small library. I forgot for the moment what literal truth I was writing, for it was indeed in quite a large library that they first met. In "our town" there is, Reader, an old-world institution, which, I think, you would well like transported to yours, a quaint subscription library "established" ever so long ago, full of wonderful nooks and corners, where (of course, if you are a member) one is sure almost at any time of the day of a solitary corner for a dream. It is a sweet provision, too, that it is managed by ladies, whom you may, if you can, imagine to yourself as the Hesperides; for there are three of them; and may not the

innumerable galleries and spiral staircases, serried with countless shelves, clustered thick with tome on tome, figure the great tree, with its many branches and its wonderful gold fruit—the tree of knowledge? The absence of the dragon from the similitude is as well, don't you think?

Books, of all things, should be tended by reverent hands; and, to my mind, the perfunctory in things ecclesiastical is hardly more distressing than the service of books as conducted in many great libraries. One feels that the *librarii* should be a sacred order, nearly allied to the monastic, refined by varying steps of initiation, and certainly celibates. They should give out their books as the priest his sacrament, should wear sacred vestments, and bear about with them the priestlike *aura*, as of divine incarnations of the great spirit of Truth and Art in whose temples they are ministrants. The next step to this ideal ministry is to have our books given out to us by women. Though they may understand them not, they handle them

with gentle courtesy, and are certainly in every way to be preferred to the youthful freckled monster with red spines upon his head, and nailed boots, "the work of the Cyclops," upon his feet, whose physiognomy is contorted by cinnamon-balls at the very moment he carries in his arms some great Golden-lips or gentle Silver-tongue. What good sweet women there are, too, who would bless heaven for the occupation!

Well, as I said, we in that particular library are more fortunate, and two of the "subscribers," at least, did at one time express their appreciation of its privileges by a daily dream among its shelves. One day—had Hercules been there overnight?—we missed one of our fair attendants. Was it Aegle, Arethusa, or Hesperia? Narcissus probably knew. And on the next day she was still missing; nor on the third had she returned; but lo! there was another in her stead—and on her Narcissus bent his gaze, according to wont. A little maid, with noticeable eyes, and the hair Rossetti loved to paint—called Hesper, "by

many," said Narcissus, one day long after, solemnly quoting the Vita Nuova, "who know not wherefore."

"Why! do *you* know?" I asked.

"Yes!" And then, for the first time, he had told me the story I have now to tell again. He had, meanwhile, rather surprised me by little touches of intimate observation of her which he occasionally let slip—as, for instance, "Have you noticed her forehead? It has a fine distinction of form; is pure ivory, surely; and you should watch how deliciously her hair springs out of it, like little wavy threads of 'old gold' set in the ivory by some cunning artist."

I had just looked at him and wondered a moment. But such attentive regard was hardly matter for surprise in his case; and, moreover, I always tried to avoid the subject of women with him, for it was the one on which alone there was danger of our disagreeing. It was the only one in which he seemed to show signs of cruelty in his disposition, though it was, I well know, but a thoughtless

cruelty; and in my heart I always felt that he was too right-minded and noble in the other great matters of life not to come right on that too when "the hour had struck." Meanwhile, he had a way of classifying amours by the number of verses inspired—as, "Heigho! it 's all over; but never mind, I got two sonnets out of her"—which seemed to me an exhibition of the worst side of his artist disposition, and which—well, Reader, jarred much on one who already knew what a true love meant. It was, however, I could see, quite unconscious: and I tried hard not to be intolerant towards him, because fortune had blessed me with an earlier illumination.

Pray, go not away with the misconception that Narcissus was ever base to a woman. No! he left that to Circe's hogs, and the one temptation he ever had towards it he turned into a shining salvation. No! he had nothing worse than the sins of the young egoist to answer for, though he afterwards came to feel those pitiful and mean enough.

Another noticeable feature of Hesper's

face was an ever-present sadness—not as of a dull grief, but as of some shining sorrow, a quality which gave her face much arresting interest. It seemed one great, rich tear. One loved to dwell upon it as upon those intense stretches of evening sky when the day yearns through half-shut eyelids in the west. One continually wondered what story it meant, for some it must mean.

Watching her thus quietly, day by day, it seemed to me that as the weeks from her first coming went by, this sadness deepened; and I could not forbear one day questioning the elder Hesperides about her, thus bringing upon myself a revelation I had little expected. For, said she, "she was glad I had spoken to her, for she had long wished to ask me to use my influence with my friend, that he might cease paying Hesper attentions which he could not mean in earnest, but which she knew were already causing Hesper to be fond of him. Having become friendly with her, she had found out her secret and remonstrated with her, with

the result that she had avoided Narcissus for some time, but not without much misery to herself, over which she was continually brooding."

All this was an utter surprise, and a saddening one; for I had grown to feel much interest in the girl, and had been especially pleased by all absence of the flighty tendencies with which too many girls in public service tempt men to their own destruction. She had seemed to me to bear herself with a maidenly self-respect that spoke of no little grace of breeding. She had two very strong claims on one's regard. She was evidently a woman, in the deep, tragic sense of that word, and a lady in the only true sense of that. The thought of a life so rich in womanly promise becoming but another of the idle playthings of Narcissus filled me with something akin to rage, and I was not long in saying some strong words to him. Not that I feared for her the coarse "ruin" the world alone thinks of. Is that the worst that can befall woman? What of the spirit-

ual deflowering, of which the bodily is but a symbol? If the first fine bloom of the soul has gone, if the dream that is only dreamed once has grown up in the imagination and been once given, the mere chastity of the body is a lie, and whatever its fecundity, the soul has nought but sterility to give to another. It is not those kisses of the lips—kisses that one forgets as one forgets the roses we smelt last year—which profane; they but soil the vessel of the sacrament, and it is the sacrament itself which those consuming spirit-kisses, which burn but through the eyes, may desecrate. It is strange that man should have so long taken the precisely opposite attitude in this matter, caring only for the observation of the vessel, and apparently dreaming not of any other possible approach to the sanctities. Probably, however, his care has not been of sanctities at all. Indeed, most have, doubtless, little suspicion of the existence of such, and the symbol has been and is but a selfish superstition amongst them—woman, a symbol whose

meaning is forgotten, but still the object of an ignorant veneration, not unrelated to the preservation of game.

Narcissus took my remonstrance a little flippantly, I thought, evidently feeling that too much had been made out of very little; for he averred that his "attentions" to Hesper had been of the slightest character, hardly more than occasional looks and whispers, which, from her cold reception of them, he had felt were more distasteful to her than otherwise. He had indeed, he said, ceased even these the last few days, as her reserve always made him feel foolish, as a man fondling a fair face in his dream wakes on a sudden to find that he is but grimacing at the air. This reassured me, and I felt little further anxiety. However, this security only proved how little I really understood the weak side of my friend. I had not realised how much he really was Narcissus, and how dear to him was a new mirror. My speaking to him was the one wrong course possible to be taken. Instead of confirming his growing

intention of indifference, it had, as might have been foreseen, the directly opposite effect; and from the moment of his learning that Hesper secretly loved him, she at once became invested with a new glamour, and grew daily more and more the forbidden fascination few can resist.

I did not learn this for many months. Meanwhile Narcissus chose to deceive me for the first and only time. At last he told me all; and how different was his manner of telling it from his former gay relations of conquest. One needed not to hear the words to see he was unveiling a sacred thing, a holiness so white and hidden, the most reverent word seemed a profanation; and, as he laboured for the least soiled wherein to enfold the revelation, his soul seemed as a maid torn with the blushing tremors of a new knowledge. Men only speak so after great and wonderful travail, and by that token I knew Narcissus loved at last. It had seemed unlikely ground from which love had first sprung forth, that of a self-worship that could

forego no slightest indulgence—but thence indeed it had come. The silent service my words had given him to know that Hesper's heart was offering to him was not enough; he must hear it articulate, his nostrils craved an actual incense. To gain this he must deceive two—his friend, and her whose poor face would kindle with hectic hope, at the false words he must say for the true words he *must* hear. It was pitifully mean; but whom has not his own hidden lust made to crawl like a thief, afraid of a shadow, in his own house? Narcissus' young lust was himself, and Moloch knew no more ruthless hunger than burns in such. Of course, it did not present itself quite nakedly to him; he persuaded himself there could be little harm —he meant none.

And so, instead of avoiding Hesper, he sought her the more persistently, and by some means so far wooed her from her reticence as to win her consent to a walk together one autumn afternoon. How little do we know the measure of our own pro-

posing! That walk was to be the most fateful his feet had ever trodden through field and wood, yet it seemed the most accidental of gallantries. A little town-maid, with a romantic passion for "us"; it would be interesting to watch the child; it would be like giving her a day's holiday, so much sunshine "in our presence." And so on. But what an entirely different complexion was the whole thing beginning to take before they had walked a mile. Behind the flippancy one had gone to meet were surely the growing features of a solemnity. Why, the child was a woman indeed; she could talk, she had brains, ideas—and, Lord bless us, Theories! She had that "excellent thing in woman," not only a voice, which she had, too, but character. Narcissus began to loose his regal robes, and from being merely courteously to be genuinely interested. Why, she was a discovery! As they walked on, her genuine delight in the autumnal nature, the real imaginative appeal it had for her, was another surprise. She had, evidently, a deep

poetry in her disposition, rarest of all female endowments. In a surprisingly few minutes from the beginning of their walk he found himself taking that "little child" with extreme seriousness, and wondering many "whethers."

They walked out again, and yet again, and Narcissus' first impressions deepened. He had his theories, too; and, surely, here was the woman! He was not in love—at least, not with her, but with her fitness for his theory.

They sat by a solitary woodside, beneath a great elm tree. The hour was full of magic, for though the sun had set, the smile of her day's joy with him had not yet faded from the face of earth. It was the hour vulgarised in drawing-room ballads as the "gloaming." They sat very near to each other; he held her hand, toying with it; and now and again their eyes met with the look that flutters before flight, that says, "Dare I give thee all? Dare I throw my eyes on thine as I would throw myself on thee?"

And then, at last, came the inevitable moment when the eyes of each seem to cry "O yes!" to the other, and the gates fly back; all the hidden light springs forth, the woods swim round, and the lips meet with a strange shock, while the eyes of the spirit close in a lapping dream of great peace.

If you are not ready to play the man, beware of a kiss such as the lips of little Hesper, that never knew to kiss before, pressed upon the mouth of Narcissus. It sent a chill shudder through him, though it was so sweet, for he could feel her whole life surging behind it; and was the kiss he had given her for it such a kiss as that? But he had spoken much to her of his ideas of marriage; she knew he was sworn for ever against that. She must know the kiss had no such meaning; for, besides, did she not scorn the soiled "tie" also? Were not their theories at one in that? He would be doing her no wrong; it was her own desire. Yet his kiss did mean more than he could have imagined it meaning a week before. She

had grown to be genuinely desirable. If love tarried, passion was awake—that dangerous passion, too, to which the intellect has added its intoxication, and that is, so to say, legitimised by an " idea."

Her woman's intuition read the silence and answered to his thought. " Have no fear," she said, with the deep deliberation of passion ; " I love you with my whole life, but I shall never burden you, Narcissus. Love me as long as you can, I shall be content ; and when the end comes, though another woman takes you, I shall not hinder."

O great girl-soul! What a poltroon, indeed, was Narcissus beside you at that moment. You ready to stake your life on the throw, he temporising and bargaining as over the terms of a lease. Surely, if he could for one moment have seen himself in the light of your greatness, he had been crushed beneath the misery of his own meanness. But as yet he had no such vision ; his one thought was, " She will do it! will she draw back?" and the feeble warnings he

was obliged to utter to keep his own terms, by assuring his conscience of "her free-will," were they not half-fearfully whispered, and with an inward haste, lest they should give her pause? "But the world, my dear—think!" "It will have cruel names for thee." "It will make thee outcast—think!"

"I know all," she had answered; "but I love you, and two years of your love would pay for all. There is no world for me but you. Till to-night I have never lived at all, and when you go I shall be as dead. The world cannot hurt such a one."

Ah me, it was a wild, sweet dream for both of them, one the woman's, one the poet's, of a "sweet impossible" taking flesh! For, do not let us blame Narcissus overmuch. He was utterly sincere; he meant no wrong. He but dreamed of following a creed to which his reason had long given a hopeless assent. In a more kindly-organised community he might have followed it, and all have been well; but the world has to be dealt with as one finds it, and we must get sad answers to

many a fair calculation if we "state" it wrongly in the equation. That there is one law for the male and another for the female had not as yet vitally entered into his considerations. He was too dizzy with the dream, or he must have seen what an unequal bargain he was about to drive.

At last he did awake, and saw it all; and in a burning shame went to Hesper, and told her that it must not be.

Her answer was unconsciously the most subtly dangerous she could have chosen; "If I like to give myself to you, why should you not take me? It is of my own free-will. My eyes are open." It was his very thought put into words, and by her. For a moment he wavered—who could blame him? "Am I my brother's keeper?"

"Yes! a thousand times yes!" cried his soul; for he was awake now, and he had come to see the dream as it was, and to shudder at himself as he had well-nigh been, just as one shudders at the thought of a precipice barely escaped. In that moment,

too, the idea of her love in all its divineness burst upon him. Here was a heart capable of a great tragic love like the loves of old he read of and whimpered for in sonnets, and what had he offered in exchange? A poor, philosophical compromise, compounded of pessimism and desire, in which a man should have all to gain and nothing to lose, for

> "The light, light love he has wings to fly
> At suspicion of a bond."

"I would I did love her," his heart was crying as he went away. "Could I love her?" was his next thought. "Do I love her?"—but that is a question that always needs longer than one day to answer.

Already he was as much in love with her as most men when they take unto themselves wives. She was desirable—he had pleasure in her presence. He had that half of love which commonly passes for all—the passion; but he lacked the additional incentives which nerve the common man to face that fear which seems well-nigh as universal as the

fear of death, I mean the fear of marriage—life's two fears: that is, he had no desire to increase his worldly possessions by annexing a dowry, or ambition of settling down and procuring a wife as a part of his establishment. After all, how full of bachelors the world would be if it were not for these motives: for the one other motive to a true marriage, the other half of love, however one names it, is it not four-leaved clover indeed? Narcissus was happily poor enough to be above those motives, even had Hesper been anything but poor too; and if he was to marry her, it would be because he was capable of loving her with that perfect love which, of course, has alone right to the sacred name, that which cannot take all and give nought, but which rather holds as watchword that *to love is better than to be loved.*

Who shall hope to express the mystery? Yet, is not thus much true, that, if it must be allowed to the cynic that love rises in self, it yet has its zenith and setting in another—in woman as in man? Two meet, and pas-

sion, the joy of the selfish part of each, is born; shall love follow depends on whether they have a particular grace of nature, love being the thanksgiving of the unselfish part for the boon granted to the other. The common nature snatches the joy and forgets the giver, but the finer never forgets, and deems life but a poor service for a gift so rare; and, though passion be long since passed, love keeps holy an eternal memory.

" Love took up the harp of life and smote on all the chords with might;
Smote the chord of self, that, trembling, pass'd in music out of sight."

Since the time of fairy-tales Love has had a way of coming in the disguise of Duty. What is the story of Beauty and the Beast but an allegory of true love? We take this maid to be our wedded wife, for her sake it perhaps seems at the time. She is sweet and beautiful and to be desired; but, all the same, we had rather shake the loose leg of bachelordom, if it might be. However it be, so we take her, or maybe it is she takes us, with

a feeling of martyrdom; but lo! when we are home together, what wonderful new lights are these beginning to ray about her, as though she had up till now kept a star hidden in her bosom. What is this new morning strength and peace in our life? Why, we thought it was but Thestylis, and lo! it is Diana after all. For the Thirteenth Maid or the Thirteenth Man, both alike, rarely come as we had expected. There seems no fitness in their arrival. It seems so ridiculously accidental, as I suppose the hour of death, whenever it comes, will seem. One had expected some high calm prelude of preparation, ending in a festival of choice, like an Indian prince's, when the maids of the land pass before him and he makes deliberate selection of the fateful She. But, instead, we are hurrying among our day's business, maybe, our last thought of her; we turn a corner, and suddenly she is before us. Or perhaps, as it fell with Narcissus, we have tried many loves that proved but passions; we have just buried the last, and

are mournfully leaving its grave determined to seek no further, to abjure bright eyes, at least for a long while, when lo! on a sudden a little maid is in our path holding out some sweet modest flowers. The maid has a sweet mouth, too, and, the old Adam being stronger than our infant resolution, we smell the flowers and kiss the mouth—to find arms that somehow, we know not why, are clinging as for life about us. Let us beware how we shake them off, for thus it is decreed shall a man meet her to have missed whom were to have missed all. Youth, like that faithless generation in the Scriptures, always craveth after a sign, but rarely shall one be given. It can only be known whether a man be worthy of Love by the way in which he looks upon Duty. Rachael often comes in the grey cloak of Leah. It rests with the man's heart whether he shall know her beneath the disguise; no other divining-rod shall aid him. If it be as Bassanio's, brave to "give and hazard all he hath," let him not fear to pass the seeming gold, the seeming

silver, to choose the seeming lead. "Why, *that 's* the lady," thou poor magnificent Morocco. Nor shall the gold fail, for her heart is that, and for silver thou shalt have those "silent silver lights undreamed of" of face and soul.

These are but scattered hints of the story of Narcissus' love as he told it me at last, in broken, struggling words, but with a light in his face one power alone could set there.

When he came to the end, and to all that little Hesper had proved to him, all the strength and illumination she had brought him, he fairly broke down and sobbed, as one may in a brother's arms. For, of course, he had come out of the ordeal a man; and Hesper had consented to be his wife. Often she had dreamed as he had passed her by with such heedless air: "If I love him so, can it be that my love shall have no power to make him mine, somehow, some day? Can I call to him so within my soul and he not hear? Can I wait and he not come?" And her love had been strong, strong as a

destiny; her voice had reached him, for it was the voice of God.

When I next saw her, what a strange brightness shone in her face, what a new beauty was there! Ah, Love, the great transfigurer! And why, too, was it that his friends began to be dissatisfied with their old photographs of Narcissus, though they had been taken but six months before? There seemed something lacking in the photograph, they said. Yes, there was; but the face had lacked it too. What was the new thing—"grip" was it, joy, peace? Yes, all three, but more besides, and Narcissus had but one name for all. It was Hesper.

Strange, too, that in spite of promises we never received a new one. Narcissus, who used to be so punctual with such a request. Perhaps it was because he had broken his looking-glass.

CHAPTER X.

"In Vishnu-Land what Avatar?"

"IF I love you for a year I shall love you forever," Narcissus had said to his Thirteenth Maid. He did love her so long, and yet he has gone away. Do you remember your *Les Misérables*, that early chapter where Valjean robs the child of his florin so soon after that great illuminating change of heart and mind had come to him? Well, still more important, do you remember the clue Hugo gives us to aberration? There is comfort and strength for so many a heart-breaking failure there. It was the old impetus, we are told, that was as yet too strong for the new control; the old instinct, too dark for the new light in the brain. It takes every vessel some time to answer to its helm; with us, human vessels, years,

maybe. Have you never suddenly become sensitive of a gracious touch in the air, and pondered it, to recognise that in some half-unconscious act you had that moment been answering for the first time the helm of an almost forgotten resolution? Ah me, blessed is it to see the prow strongly sweeping up against the sky at last!

"Send not a poet to London," said Heine, and it was a true word. At least, send him not till his thews are laced and his bones set. He may miss somewhat, of course; there is no gain without a loss. He may be in ignorance of the last *nuance*, and if he deserves fame he must gain it unaided of the vulgar notoriety which, if he have a friend or two in the new journalism, they will be so eager to bestow; but he will have kept his soul intact, which, after all, is the main matter. It is sweet, doubtless, to be one of those same mushroom-men, sweet to be placarded as "the new" this or that, to step for a day into the triumphal car of newspaper renown, drawn by teams of willing paragraph-men—

who, does it never strike you? are but doing it all for hire, and earning their bread by their bent necks. Yet for those to whom it is denied there is solid comfort; for it is not fame, and, worse still, it is not life, 't is but to be "a Bourbon in a crown of straws."

If one could only take poor foolish Cockneydom right away outside this poor vainglorious city, and show them how the stars are smiling to themselves above it, nudging each other, so to say, at the silly lights that ape their shining—for such a little while!

Yes, that is one danger of the poet in London, that he should come to think himself "somebody"; though, doubtless, in proportion as he is a poet, the other danger will be the greater, that he should deem himself "nobody." Modest by nature, credulous of appearances, the noisy pretensions of the hundred and one small celebrities, and the din of their retainers this side and that, in comparison with his own unattended course, what wonder if his heart sinks and he gives up the game; how shall his little pipe,

though it be of silver, hope to be heard in this land of bassoons? To take London seriously is death both to man and artist. Narcissus had sufficient success there to make this a temptation, and he fell. He lost his hold of the great things of life, he forgot the stars, he forgot his love, and what wonder that his art sickened also. For a few months life was but a feverish clutch after varied sensation, especially the dear tickle of applause; he caught the facile atheistic flippancy of that poor creature, the "modern young man," all-knowing and all-foolish, and he came very near losing his soul in the nightmare. But he had too much ballast in him to go quite under, and at last strength came, and he shook the weakness from him. Yet the fall had been too far and too cruel for him to be happy again soon. He had gone forth so confident in his new strength of manly love; and to fall so, and almost without an effort! Who has not called upon the mountains to cover him in such an hour of awakening, and who will

wonder that Narcissus dared not look upon the face of Hesper till solitude had washed him clean, and bathed him in its healing oil? I alone bade him good-bye. It was in this room wherein I am writing, the study we had taken together, where still his books look down at me from the shelves, and all the memorials of his young life remain. O *can* it have been but "a phantom of false morning"? A Milton snatched up at the last moment was the one book he took with him.

From that night until this he has made but one sign—a little note which Hesper has shown me, a sob and a cry to which even a love that had been more deeply wronged could never have turned a deaf ear. Surely not Hesper, for she had long forgiven him, knowing his weakness for what it was. She and I sometimes sit here together in the evenings and talk of him; and every echo in the corridor sets us listening, for he may be at the other side of the world, or but the other side of the street—we know so little of

his fate. Where he is we know not; but if he still lives, *what* he is we have the assurance of faith. This time he has not failed, we know. But why delay so long?

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THE END.



